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# The Nicaraguan Resistance and U.S. Policy

Report on a May 1987 Conference

David Ronfeldt and Brian Jenkins  
Conference Chairmen

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— This report presents the results of a 1987 RAND conference on the Nicaraguan Resistance and U.S. Policy Implications. The conference, part of RAND's Western Hemisphere Forum, included presentations on (1) background of the resistance and U.S. support for it, (2) the strategic poverty of the Reagan Administration's vision regarding Nicaragua, (3) the Nicaraguan resistance in transition, (4) Sandinista strategy, and (5) diplomatic-political options in Nicaragua. The conference participants had varied backgrounds in official diplomatic and military capacities and in political activism, policy analysis, or policy-oriented research. *y. 1. - > over*

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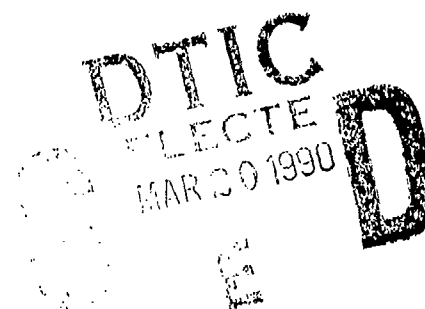
# **The Nicaraguan Resistance and U.S. Policy**

## **Report on a May 1987 Conference**

David Ronfeldt and Brian Jenkins  
Conference Chairmen

June 1989

Prepared for  
The Office of the Secretary of Defense  
The United States Air Force  
The United States Army



**RAND**

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## PREFACE

This report presents the results of an all-day conference held at The RAND Corporation on May 14, 1987, on "The Nicaraguan Resistance and U.S. Policy Implications." The conference was a part of RAND's Western Hemisphere Forum, a project sponsored by the National Defense Research Institute, RAND's OSD-sponsored Federally Funded Research and Development Center. Additional support came from Project AIR FORCE, the Arroyo Center, and RAND's own research funds.

The conference was held to help RAND researchers become better informed about the Nicaraguan Resistance and its implications for U.S. policy and to discuss the key issues involved. Several outside experts were invited to make presentations to an audience of selected RAND staff members.

The morning session of the conference, chaired by David Ronfeldt, was devoted to panel presentations by six experts on the Resistance and various aspects of Central America. Five of those presentations are included in this volume.

The afternoon session consisted of a roundtable discussion among the panelists and the RAND staff members, with Brian Jenkins as moderator. A summary of the discussion, prepared by rapporteur Jeffrey Simon, is also included here.

The purpose of this report is to record the views expressed by the participants, none of which necessarily reflect the views of The RAND Corporation or its research sponsors. The report contains a selected set of viewpoints expressed in May 1987, and the reader should not rely solely on them to form positions on current policy questions.

Sincere appreciation is extended to Konrad Kellen and Edward Gonzalez for the many useful comments they provided on an earlier draft of this report.



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## INTRODUCTION

Brian Jenkins and David Ronfeldt

The Nicaraguan Resistance, commonly known as the Contras—literally, those who are against—is easier to define by what it opposes, by what it is not, than by what it is. There is precious little agreement about the latter. Some argue that the Resistance is nothing more than a mercenary army raised and paid for by the United States; others see it as an authentic indigenous response to the economic hardship and political repression that characterize the Sandinista revolution—although they may not go so far as to call the Contras “freedom fighters.”

What is the Resistance's real purpose? Is it a paramilitary operation to gather intelligence and interdict Sandinista arms shipments to Marxist guerrillas in El Salvador? A weapon to punish the Sandinista government for its support of insurgencies elsewhere in Central America? A means to prevent the Sandinistas from consolidating their power? A movement to sabotage Nicaragua economically, thereby increasing domestic discontent and preventing the country from becoming a showcase for Marxist revolution? To some, the Contras' ultimate goal is nothing less than the overthrow of the Sandinista regime. Of late, the Resistance has also been presented as a means to force the Sandinistas to the negotiating table, a means to extract political concessions that will bring greater political freedom in Nicaragua, a threat to insure that the Sandinistas comply with their promises.

That's the trouble, noted one U.S. official—there are 50 agendas. And the agendas in Washington differ from those in Miami, which in turn differ from those of the military taskforces in the field. We have few clues as to what the members of the Resistance themselves think they are doing. And who speaks for them? Who should we listen to? The Resistance soldiers, the field commanders, or their political spokesmen in Miami and Washington?

The military prowess of the Resistance is both derided and defended. It is perhaps the worst guerrilla army ever to take the field, says one expert on insurgency. Tacitly admitting the Resistance's past deficiencies when it comes to fighting, its defenders argue that the guerrillas are steadily getting stronger but have been hampered by a “policy of insufficiency”—chronically inadequate, wavering, and uncertain U.S. support that makes it impossible for Resistance leaders to

plan and carry out effective military operations. With enough guns and bullets, their defenders say, they can and will fight, as they demonstrated in 1987. But, say others, it is precisely that external support that will render them incapable of creating local support, which is essential if military success is to be translated into political power.

Those who would set out to analyze the Nicaraguan Resistance are thus provided with ample topics and great latitude for debate, but they often lack adequate information on which to base an analysis. This is the situation that gave rise to the idea for a conference at which the people who are most familiar with the Resistance could meet with those most experienced in the analysis of other guerrilla and insurgent movements to focus on some key questions. This volume reports the proceedings of that conference, which was convened at The RAND Corporation in May 1987.

In retrospect, it was an especially interesting time to hold such a conference. The many doubts and criticisms about the Resistance were by then well-established in the U.S. Congress, in the press, and among the public and were being fueled anew by Congressional hearings about connections between the secret sale of arms to Iran and the diversion of the profits to the Contras, and about other secret fund-raising efforts to support the resistance movement. As these hearings unfolded, they would strengthen claims that the Resistance lacked sufficient leadership, manpower, organization, motivation, strategy, training, and popular support to constitute a militarily and politically effective force against the Sandinista regime.

By the time of the conference, however, some observers saw signs that the Resistance was perhaps in better shape than had previously been presumed, that positive changes were occurring throughout the movement, and that the Resistance would finally be capable of mounting an offensive inside Nicaragua. Resistance units, with thousands of new fighters, were reportedly moving out of Honduras and into Nicaragua. And the Resistance's top political and military leadership in Miami, previously constituted as the United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO), was being reorganized and expanded into the Nicaraguan Resistance.

Against this background, the conference enabled selected members of the RAND staff to assess current information and address key issues about the Resistance and U.S. policy in the company of six experts. Although the political and military situation has changed substantially since the conference was held—notably as a result of the peace negotiations accord signed by the Central American presidents in August 1987—little has changed in the public policy dialogue about the Contras themselves. If the conference were repeated today, many of the

themes and points that arose in the May 1987 session would still be pertinent.

## PURPOSE AND FORMAT OF THE CONFERENCE

Since the Contras first appeared in the early 1980s, the Resistance has been the subject of public policy debate. It has been discussed in recent RAND studies on Nicaragua, Honduras, and Cuba; in an earlier RAND briefing to the Kissinger Commission; and in ongoing RAND research on Soviet behavior in the Third World and Western support for anti-communist insurgencies.<sup>1</sup> No RAND research project has specifically addressed the Resistance, but analysts have been obliged to consider the recurring issues it has posed—issues that have at times raised broader considerations about U.S. security interests, strategy, and ethics in the conduct of U.S. foreign policy.

The purpose of the conference reported here was to help RAND staff members voice and focus their thoughts; the intent was not to arrive at policy conclusions and recommendations, but to identify areas of consensus and debate, questions for further inquiry, and issues amenable to research. The conference was not organized on behalf of any particular client or in support of any policy perspective.

A panel was assembled, consisting of the following six experts on the Resistance and various aspects of U.S.-Central American relations:

- Cresencio Arcos, a career officer from the U.S. Information Agency (USIA), who has served in Honduras, was working in the Department of State's Office of Nicaraguan Human Rights at the time of the conference, and is currently a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State in the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs.
- Arturo Cruz, Jr., a Nicaraguan citizen and former Sandinista official who joined his father (Arturo Cruz, Sr.) in exile, served for a time as an adviser to the UNO, was an independent commentator on the Central American conflict at the time of the conference, and is currently writing two books about his country.

<sup>1</sup>See David Ronfeldt, with Konrad Kellen and Richard Millett, *U.S. Involvement in Central America: Three Views from Honduras*, The RAND Corporation, R-3662-USDP, July 1989; Gordon McCormick, Edward Gonzalez, Brian Jenkins, and David Ronfeldt, *Nicaraguan Security Policy: Trends and Projections*, The RAND Corporation, R-3532-PA&E, January 1988; Edward Gonzalez and David Ronfeldt, *Castro, Cuba, and the World*, The RAND Corporation, R-3420, June 1986; Edward Gonzalez, Brian Michael Jenkins, David Ronfeldt, and Caesar Sereseres, *U.S. Policy for Central America: A Briefing*, The RAND Corporation, R-3150-RC, March 1984; Alexander R. Alexiev, *The New Soviet Strategy in the Third World*, The RAND Corporation, R-1995, June 1983.

- Colonel Alden Cunningham, the U.S. Defense Attaché at the U.S. Embassy in Managua during 1983-1985, who has served since then as the director of the Latin American Studies program at the U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks.
- Rene Herrera, a Nicaraguan citizen who left Nicaragua before the Sandinista revolution; a visiting professor of international relations at El Colegio de Mexico, he was serving as a political adviser to the Nicaraguan Resistance at the time of the conference.
- Anthony Maingot, a political sociologist specializing in Caribbean and Latin American issues at Florida International University, who is currently the editor of the journal *Hemisphere*; he was on leave to work at RAND at the time of the conference.
- Caesar Sereseres, a former RAND consultant, who worked at the U.S. State Department in 1985-1986 and is now a political scientist specializing in Central America at the University of California, Irvine.

As a group, these individuals brought diverse and well-informed views to the conference. They were not collectively pro- or anti-Resistance. They were capable of raising and discussing issues from many different perspectives. And they represented a body of expertise and information that came from "hands-on" experience in Washington, Miami, and all parts of Central America, either in official diplomatic and military capacities or as political activists, policy analysts, or policy-oriented researchers.

The papers in this volume come from the presentations made by the panelists in the morning session. Caesar Sereseres (and Cresencio Arcos, who did not write a paper) provided background about the development of the Resistance and U.S. support for it. Arturo Cruz and Rene Herrera spoke from the standpoint of Nicaraguans in exile who are directly familiar with both the Sandinista regime and the Resistance. Alden Cunningham addressed Nicaragua's growing military and security capabilities. Finally, both Cunningham and Anthony Maingot raised doubts about the relative military capabilities of the Resistance, which led to a discussion of policy alternatives, including political negotiations.

The audience consisted of about 40 RAND staff members who were invited to participate because of their interest in the topic and their research backgrounds on related issues, including guerrilla warfare and other forms of low-intensity conflict, national security policy planning,

U.S.-Latin American relations, Soviet involvement in the Third World, and U.S. domestic issues such as immigration and refugee flows.

The afternoon session was devoted to a discussion among the panelists and the audience, revolving around a set of questions that had been prepared in advance.<sup>2</sup> To encourage a free-flowing exchange of views, all remarks were kept off the record, but a rapporteur kept track of the discussion, and his summary is included in this report.

### **THE RESISTANCE: HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE CONFERENCE**

The conference opened with cautious optimism about the prospects for the Resistance. The first four presentations offered new grounds for hope that the Contras in the field were quietly changing and growing into an effective, respectable insurgency. But as the presentations progressed, and as discussions ensued among the panelists and audience participants, the focus shifted to the guerrillas' many deficiencies, their extreme dependence on U.S. policy and politics, and the rapidly growing military capabilities of the increasingly consolidated Sandinista regime. As a result, the conference closed with almost everybody feeling quite pessimistic about the inherent nature and real prospects of the Resistance.

While the conference was not a research effort and it did not produce conclusions or recommendations for U.S. policy, many of the observations that emerged during the presentations and discussions are still relevant today. Only a few prominent points can be covered in this brief introductory summary; the individual papers and the rapporteur's report provide detailed discussions of these and the many other points that arose during the day-long session.

#### **A Transformation in the Nature of the Resistance?**

The central question continued to be: Who, really, are the Contras? Those closest to the movement argued that the social base of the Resistance has changed substantially over time. Although ex-Somocista and ex-Guardia figures still held some positions in mid-1987—they were the only people who knew how to run a military operation when the Resistance was formed as a strictly paramilitary operation in 1981—the Resistance forces in the field were evolving into an indigenous peasant movement. Many of the fighters were ex-Sandinistas, joined increasingly by rural villagers whose political orien-

<sup>2</sup>The prepared questions are reproduced in the Appendix to this report.

tations were independent of such labels. Rural kinship and village networks among people hurt by the policies and practices of the Sandinista revolution—not ideological identification with Somocismo or Sandinismo per se—had become the key factor in recruitment into the Resistance. As one panelist observed, the forces in the field increasingly resembled a Zapatista peasant army,<sup>3</sup> but without a Zapata to lead them. This change was occurring in the field at the time of the conference; but, partly because it was not reflected in the political leadership of the Resistance, it remained invisible to the outside world.

In addition to observing that the social base of the Resistance was expanding, several panelists also reported that the Contras, at least some of their combat units, were becoming skilled at conducting military operations. There were reportedly thousands more fighters in the field than there had been a few years earlier; they were better organized into taskforces; and many taskforce commanders were effective leaders. The Contras were thus increasingly able to mount successive operations, and their selection of targets now reflected a sense of strategy. They had adequate maps with which to find their targets and secure tactical radios with which to communicate during an operation. They were skilled at receiving aerial resupply. Furthermore, they had established a radio station for broadcasting to the Nicaraguan people and had introduced human-rights representatives into each regional command and taskforce.

Because of this apparent transformation in the composition and capabilities of the Resistance, those closest to it at the conference often returned to the theme that somewhere out in the field an authentic revolution was indeed being created by a new generation of recruits and commanders, represented by but not reflected in the formal political leadership of the movement. This was a tempting notion. It would mean that the Contras were more Nicaraguan, less the servants of U.S. interests, and thus more worthy of U.S. support. But some participants kept wondering just how genuine, how thorough, this transformation was. Was it partly wishful thinking—the expression of anxious hopes for a true indigenous revolution, a nationalist myth beyond Miami, uncontaminated by Washington? Or were Sandinista repression, political imposition, and economic dislocations alienating large numbers of the Nicaraguan population to such an extent that those elements were finally moving to join or at least support the Resistance fighters in the field? Without further research, the conference participants could not know for certain.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Named for Mexican agrarian revolutionary Emiliano Zapata.

<sup>4</sup>Months after the conference, similar trends in the composition and character of the Contras were reported by James Lemoyne in "Can the Contras Go On?" *The New York Times Magazine*, October 4, 1987, pp. 32-35, 65-66, 68. An official U.S. effort to docu-

### Persistent Political and Military Deficiencies

Despite these perceived improvements, the effectiveness of the Resistance was thought to remain limited by problems that have characterized the movement from the very beginning—problems that were far from being solved and that have kept the Resistance identified more with its deficiencies than with its capabilities. One panelist in close contact with the ongoing reorganization of the UNO into the Nicaraguan Resistance emphasized the need for greater communication and coordination between the political and military branches of the movement, and pointed out that some progress was being made toward achieving this. Nonetheless, the conference discussions as a whole emphasized the 'Contras' persistent inability to fulfill either the political or the military requirements for conducting a successful insurgency.

For example, the Resistance has been unable to offer a political program that clarifies what it is fighting for. It has been unable to develop an overall strategy that bridges the political and military dimensions of the struggle. And, so far, there has been little coordination or cooperation between the political and military branches of the movement. Resistance leaders and field commanders have been aware of the need to address these organizational and strategic problems, but major obstacles have stood in the way.

One obstacle has been the lack of agreement about the purpose and mission of the Resistance. As mentioned above, views about what the Contras are supposed to do vary and have changed over time. Although the participants at the conference offered their own diverse views, they reflected only portions of the spectrum of discussion—mainly the portions that emerge from and revolve around circumstances in Washington and Miami. The conference received no direct input, for example, from the military commanders or soldiers in the field, who would probably have presented entirely different views about why they were fighting and what they intended to achieve.

The Resistance's notable lack of a political program may be traced simply to lack of agreement on what that program ought to be. One panelist observed that the movement's political leaders and supporters in Miami might have one idea—the restoration of their properties and

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ment changes in the social background of the Resistance produced *Nicaraguan Biographies: A Resource Book*, U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, Special Report No. 174, January 1988. If future research should confirm the observations made at the conference and in these publications, it may mean that the Sandinista leadership consented to peace negotiations in late 1987 and the U.S. Congress cut loose from supporting the Resistance militarily in early 1988, during precisely the period when a significant transformation in the nature and strength of the Resistance movement was taking root.

political positions, for example—while those fighting in the field have their own, quite different, motives and agenda. Field commanders in particular might not like the notion that they were fighting to achieve negotiations; they want military victory. Debates and dissension among the conservative and the liberal members of the Resistance's political apparatus, and disputes among the field commanders and between them and the Miami-based leaders, may reflect not only political but also personal differences. Attempts to create a political program and to coordinate the political with the military activities, no matter how necessary, would reveal and sharpen those differences.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Contras' Dependence on the United States**

According to a number of conference participants, the Nicaraguan insurgency, in comparison with past and present insurgencies around the world, appeared to be the least indigenous in terms of its origins, the most lacking in local support, the most dependent on foreign (i.e., U.S.) support, and the most clearly doomed should that support cease. The Resistance's lack of authenticity as an indigenous insurgency and the Contras' extreme dependence on U.S. support were deprecated even by participants who otherwise generally favored active U.S. support to anti-communist insurgencies.

The policy behavior of the United States in structuring and supporting the Resistance thus received considerable criticism during the conference. It was pointed out that the U.S. government is organized to support small paramilitary operations with limited tactical objectives. But in this case, the U.S. government was trying to run an ever larger, more broadly based guerrilla war that had important political as well as military dimensions and required a central strategy. Largely because of U.S. policy, the Resistance has always been structured as a force with short-term, purely military objectives. But to sustain itself as a guerrilla movement, the Resistance would need a structure and a strategy appropriate to conducting a long-term political and military campaign.

It was acknowledged by most conference participants that the Contras, because of their dependence on U.S. support—particularly aerial

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<sup>5</sup>This problem is not unique to the Contras. Most insurgent movements must attempt to weld into a single force a spectrum of diverse political goals and ideological strains that may be united only by shared opposition to the government. In some cases, a semblance of harmony has been realized by the creation of broad national fronts; in other cases, insurgent movements have avoided concrete political programs altogether, arguing that political discussions should be deferred until victory has been achieved. In comparison with other insurgent movements, however, the Nicaraguan Resistance has been notable for its lack of success in dealing with this problem.

resupply—for their operations, would fall apart if such support were withdrawn. Yet several discussants noted that an insurgency that lacks an independent identity and cannot survive and progress on its own merits may not stand much chance of succeeding even with U.S. support.

Discussion at the conference applied not just to the high level of U.S. support that the Resistance required, but also to the on-and-off nature of that support and the qualifications and constraints that U.S. policy imposed on it. In the words of one panelist, U.S. policy has amounted to a "policy of insufficiency" that has responded more to U.S. domestic political requirements than to the real requirements of supporting an insurgency. As a result, the Resistance looked increasingly like "a Bay of Pigs in slow motion."

### **An Insurgency Governed by U.S. Domestic Politics**

The Resistance was supposed to be defining its struggle primarily in terms of combating a revolutionary regime bent on Marxism-Leninism with strong Soviet and Cuban backing. But instead, partly because of their extreme dependence on U.S. support, the Contras have been defining their struggle primarily in terms of U.S. domestic politics.

Most conference participants lamented the extraordinary degree to which the objectives, level, and nature of U.S. support for the Resistance were determined by U.S. domestic politics, where aims and priorities keep shifting, a true national consensus appears unachievable, and nothing is ever settled. As one panelist pointed out, everything the United States has done for the Resistance has reflected temporary compromises and tradeoffs that may make sense in Congressional corridors but often appear absurd in the field when it comes time to translate statements and requirements of U.S. policy into doctrine, strategy, and logistical support for an operational insurgency.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Although the pattern was not discussed at the conference, U.S. policy toward Latin America, in our opinion, has often been influenced by ultraliberal and ultraconservative politicians and policy activists who treat Latin America as a kind of "dumping ground" for restrictive, discriminatory, and patronizing legislation and other policy measures that seem to express high-minded principles—typically, principles that are violated more seriously elsewhere in the world, for example, in the Middle East or Southeast Asia, but are too difficult to apply in those areas because of a Soviet threat or some other compelling interest. Why this pattern should exist is unclear. Perhaps it has something to do with the feeling that Latin America is part of the New World and therefore should be more like the United States. Perhaps it reflects a displacement of frustration at having to make unsatisfactory compromises in other parts of the world. Or perhaps the mainstream elements of a U.S. administration or political party may prefer to see their more radical colleagues and constituencies occupied with Latin America, so that they won't meddle in other, "more important" matters. Whatever the reasons, Latin America has been the object of selective U.S. policy morality since at least the 1960s. Arms transfers and security relations in particular have been subjected, at one time or another, to re-

One undesirable result of the primacy of U.S. politics is that both sides in Nicaragua—the Sandinistas and the Resistance—have come to see the debate in Washington as the principal battlefield. The Resistance leaders who command the attention of the outside world have conducted their struggle largely in terms of U.S. domestic politics, not the Nicaraguan reality. According to some participants at the conference, the Resistance fighters in the field are being “ill-served” by their representatives in the United States, who play exile politics. They offer sophisticated analyses of what the Democrats or the Republicans may do under various circumstances; they count noses in Congress; they time offensives to coincide with key votes. Their ability to speak to Washington in American political language, interpret the mysteries of Washington to their Resistance cohorts, and control the funds provided by the Americans has given these leaders power over isolated field commanders who are not permitted to see or deal with the world outside.

Thus, as far as Washington and Miami are concerned, it seems that military actions are often calculated to win converts not in Nicaragua but in Washington itself, to demonstrate that the Resistance is worthy of continued U.S. support. As several participants noted, this stands in sharp contrast to the U.S.-assisted guerrilla movements in Afghanistan and Angola, which certainly are not American creations, and which follow their own dynamics whether or not their behavior happens to conform to U.S. policy.

As many conference participants recognized, the Sandinistas also have come to define their war against the Resistance largely in terms of domestic politics in the United States. Here, the Sandinistas believe they have won. Congress has become increasingly polarized on the issue. The Reagan Administration has been increasingly on the defensive, unable to impose its will.

### **A Pessimistic Prognosis Against a Tough Foe**

Whatever their predisposition toward the Resistance, the participants all found that the discussions had a sobering effect. By the end

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strictive U.S. legislation that claims to promote democracy or inhibit dictatorship in the region. The Carter Administration was criticized for left-leaning forms of human-rights activism and antimilitarism in the region. The Reagan Administration has been accused of letting right-wing fringe activists “have” Central America, partly to keep them from interfering in Soviet and Chinese issues. The pattern may also occur in West European political and ideological behavior toward Latin America. An early discussion of the pattern appears in David Ronfeldt and Caesar Sereseres, *U.S. Arms Transfers, Diplomacy, and Security in Latin America and Beyond*, The RAND Corporation, P-6005, October 1977, p. 3 and passim.

of the meeting, no one thought the Resistance could win militarily or do well politically; optimism was in short supply. The guerrillas may improve, some participants argued, but so will the Sandinistas.

With continued U.S. support, the Contras were, at the time of the conference, effective at small-unit operations and able to operate in the Eastern two-thirds of the country. They could be expected to make further gains, perhaps even to consolidate a territorial hold there. But this area is mostly rural and contains only 30 percent of Nicaragua's population. The Resistance was far from having the capability for major engagements against the Sandinista armed forces, and it seemed unlikely that it could capture any major urban center in the near future—a prediction borne out by subsequent events.

With so many problems dimming the outlook for the Resistance, even the most optimistic scenarios for eventual victory over the Sandinista regime were measured in years. But the credibility of any form of optimism at the conference was darkened by the fact that the Sandinistas' military and security capabilities were said to be expanding and improving at a much faster rate than were the Contras'. The panelists provided ample testimony that the Sandinistas were creating an effective military machine and an internal security apparatus that could prevent the Resistance from expanding into the more heavily populated areas of the country.

Despite the economic hardship and political repression in Nicaragua, there is little evidence of a mass movement that could be arrayed against the Sandinista government. Indeed, one panelist recounted a telling interview with an elderly citizen in a provincial city in Nicaragua who, when asked whether he supported the Contras or the Sandinistas, simply replied, "We go with the one who is in charge—*con quien manda*." Given this psychological reality, the Resistance seemed unlikely to pose a viable choice for much of the population; Nicaragua seemed on track to becoming a closed system with the Sandinistas clearly in control.

## BEYOND THE NICARAGUAN RESISTANCE

If by the end of the conference, continued U.S. support for the Resistance aroused little enthusiasm among the participants, none of the possible alternatives aroused widespread enthusiasm either.

The Resistance retained some appeal as a relatively low-cost, low-risk option for the United States—a "cheap" way to keep pressure on the Sandinista regime and the Nicaraguan economy, a form of containment that did not require U.S. bases or vast military assistance to the

surrounding Central American countries, a possible rallying point in the unlikely event of an internal uprising, and a foothold for the unlikely prospect of direct U.S. military intervention. But for most conference participants, this did not add up to a lot in terms of strategic or ethical arguments.

As pointed out by a panelist who strongly supported the low-cost, low-risk argument, this kind of strategy raised serious ethical issues in that it was based on Nicaraguans killing other Nicaraguans to keep American military forces from being committed to the fray. The option may be cheap for the United States, but it imposes moral costs and risks on others that the United States is unwilling to bear itself. To some participants, it also seemed amoral for the United States to stay outside the conflict while trying to dominate what the Resistance could do militarily or politically.

Direct U.S. military intervention is what the most fervent Resistance supporters often warn will be necessary if the Contras fail. No matter how unlikely U.S. military intervention may be considered in this country, many on both sides of the conflict in Nicaragua and in the surrounding Central American countries have long believed that the Resistance is only an interim half-measure, that the war will eventually be Americanized with the involvement of U.S. forces.

Nonetheless, no one at the conference advocated U.S. military intervention or deemed it likely. In addition, no one argued that the option of long-term military containment of Nicaragua would prove cost-effective or successful from the standpoint of either U.S. interests or the interests of Nicaragua's immediate neighbors. Containment would be an expensive undertaking; moreover, if it required the long-term presence of U.S. forces, it could fuel the growing anti-Americanism in the region.

Doubts were also voiced about the problems and risks inherent in trying to arrive at a negotiated political settlement with a Marxist-Leninist regime. The Contadora process aroused little favorable comment at the conference. Yet many participants felt that some form of political negotiation to resolve the Central American conflict was ultimately preferable to continued reliance on the Resistance. Two panelists in particular—both fully opposed to the Sandinista regime but more dubious than the others about the military outlook for the Resistance—recommended U.S. support for the peace initiative then being proposed by President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica, even if it meant shifting away from supporting the Resistance. Unfortunately, it was noted, the military strategy behind the Resistance was not designed to support a negotiated political outcome.

In any event, the conference participants kept wondering about the possible future emergence of a more indigenous anti-Sandirista movement. They also kept raising broader analytical questions about the political and military difficulties that are bound to face an insurgency whose origin and identity are tied to an external sponsor. Can an insurgency be concocted by an external power? Can an externally sponsored paramilitary organization transform itself into an indigenous self-sustaining guerrilla force? If so, how might that transformation be achieved? And how would we know if it were taking place?

## THE NICARAGUAN RESISTANCE AND U.S. POLICY

Caesar D. Sereseres

After two years of work and travel in Central America, I have come away with three primary concerns about the Nicaraguan Resistance and the U.S. program that supports this movement.

My first concern is that the United States made an early, but unavoidable, bureaucratic mistake in treating the Contras as a covert paramilitary operation managed by the U.S. government instead of supporting them as an overt insurgency movement. This bureaucratic mistake, which derived from and was subsequently compounded by legal issues surrounding U.S. involvement in the war, has meant the imposition on the Contras of a doctrine and an organization that are not well suited to dealing militarily or politically with the unconventional war they are waging.

My second concern is the limited practicality of coercive diplomacy—as spelled out in Thomas Schelling's concept of "compellence theory."<sup>1</sup> From the very beginning, many in Washington have been unwilling to accept the limits of coercion in dealing with what is regarded as a small, weak, underdeveloped nation. The magnitude of the problem of a Leninist regime in Nicaragua has not been fully addressed by the entire U.S. government, although individuals such as General Paul Gorman have called for greater realism about what the Contras can and cannot be expected to accomplish militarily in the short term.

My third concern has to do with ethical and moral dilemmas raised by the U.S. program and the way it has evolved. After costing out the options, the policymakers, Congress included, have opted for the "cheapest way out"—keeping the American military out of Nicaragua, yet keeping a program going, even a half-hearted program, as long it means Nicaraguans killing Nicaraguans, while blame for a "bad" policy is endlessly debated.

I raise these concerns at the outset because I think they are important to discuss. However, I will confine my assessments to the nature of the U.S. program. I then will focus on the substantial changes

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<sup>1</sup>See Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, Yale University Press, New Haven, Conn., 1967.

occurring in the nature of the Resistance, which by 1986 had become a genuine national insurgency.

### **THE BEGINNINGS AND ENSUING DEBILITIES OF THE U.S. PROGRAM**

The United States is providing support to the Resistance, with four objectives in mind: (1) to induce the Sandinistas to end support for insurgencies in the region; (2) to hamper or reduce the arms, intelligence, training, and moral support given by the Sandinistas to the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) guerrillas in El Salvador; (3) to divert Nicaraguan resources and energies from further internal consolidation activities; and (4) to bring the Sandinistas into a constructive negotiating process. But these objectives were not so clear in 1981.

The December 1981 decision—the basis for the U.S. program to support the Contras—authorized covert support for an interdiction force. The covert program soon proved not to be a simple matter of allocating dollars to provide combatants with guns and ammunition. It set in motion a complex and confusing process, one that quickly began to break down, not because of operational failures, but for political reasons.

In 1980, the U.S. policymakers in the four key U.S. bureaucracies that were entrusted with U.S. policy and strategy toward Central America during the period (the National Security Council, the State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the Defense Department) believed that there was no quick fix in the case of Nicaragua. They also concluded that a successful outcome in El Salvador could not be achieved by focusing only on El Salvador, but would require dealing partly with problems emanating from Nicaragua, even though there was no clear understanding about how to deal with Nicaragua.

In many respects, then, the 1981 decision represented a compromise among different bureaucratic interests and political intentions: Some saw the new program as only helping solve the problem of El Salvador; others saw it as a first step toward bigger things against the Sandinistas. It was not entirely clear, however, whether that meant overthrowing the government in Managua or just compelling the Sandinistas to open up the political system. For some, the decision represented a way to achieve a quick fix in Central America; but for others, it was a way to gain some political space at home for dealing with the more conservative sectors of the Reagan Administration. Meanwhile, the Hondurans were either misled or they misinterpreted the way the decision

was explained to them. And the Contras, who assumed the principal responsibility for fighting, interpreted the new U.S. support in still different ways.

The decision was thus the product of compromises open to multiple interpretations. For this and many other reasons, the effort to develop the U.S. program to support the Contras has ever since been buffeted by shifts in U.S. personnel and in U.S. bureaucratic, strategic, and policy priorities in Central America, and by uncertainties about how to legally implement the decision in a charged U.S. domestic political environment.

### **U.S. Personnel, Bureaucratic, Strategic, and Policy Shifts**

Since 1981, there has been significant personnel turnover in the U.S. agencies involved with this issue. The present policymakers are the third "generation" to deal with Central American policy. The bureaucratic alliances that were formed in 1981 no longer exist. The politics and the psychology behind the decision and the interpretations of the key decisionmakers who pushed it are likewise gone. Since that time, there have been three Assistant Secretaries of State and at least three sets of Ambassadors in the region. The same kind of turnover has occurred in the other agencies involved. Less than a half-dozen individuals remain directly involved who know first-hand how the policy has evolved and the issues it has generated (most of those individuals are at the CIA).

In addition to personnel shifts, a significant strategic and bureaucratic shift took place in U.S. policy after April 1985. A month earlier, Jose Napoleon Duarte, the newly elected president of El Salvador, consolidated his political power when the Christian Democrats took control of the National Assembly. This development in Central America allowed a shift in the U.S. focus: The energies of the key decisionmakers in Washington and U.S. intelligence platforms in the region gradually turned from El Salvador to Nicaragua.<sup>2</sup>

Policy shifts, a third debilitating factor, were expressed through the constant undoing of decisions and the making of new decisions based on temporary compromises. As Secretary Shultz frequently observes, "Nothing is ever settled in Washington anymore." A kind of catharsis

<sup>2</sup>Despite the decision to implement a covert program in late 1981, it was not until mid-1983 that permanent U.S. intelligence platforms were operational in the region. Until then, the United States had no eyes or ears. The Administration was able to use captured documents in December 1980 to expose Communist Party officials searching for arms, and the same documents helped to track the movements of Salvadoran FMLN leadership back to Managua and Cuba. However, little of today's publicly acknowledged intelligence apparatus existed in the Central American region between 1980 and 1982.

regarding the Resistance has taken place every six to twelve months as the U.S. Congress reviews and reconsiders what it feels the United States should be doing in Nicaragua and in Central America. In 1986, for example, Congress provided a lengthy, complex "manual"—in reality, the legislation approving \$100 million to support the Resistance—on how to conduct an insurgency in Nicaragua. The document's language and conditions were largely the product of political compromises, each calculated to please different Congressmen for the purpose of gaining a crucial vote.

### **The Problem of Legally Implementing the Decision**

Against this background of personnel, bureaucratic, and policy shifts, there have been debilitating legal uncertainties about how the United States is supposed to implement the decision and thereby support the program in Nicaragua. This has led to at least twelve separate investigations. Political uncertainty surfaced within two years about defining and developing a paramilitary operation based on an executive order.

One particular problem has been that of reporting requirements: When do they apply? And to whom should certain types of activities and support be reported? Humanitarian assistance programs in Central America consisted of more than just providing cornmeal and boots. Even the accounting became politicized because of Congressional concern over who spent the money and how the money was spent. Issues involving the War Powers Act have been raised. There was the question of soliciting funds from other countries (and, related to that, the diversion of funds). What was U.S. funding, and what was not U.S. funding? Arms export laws had to be constantly examined. Allegations of illegal lobbying (for example, by the U.S. State Department's Office of Public Diplomacy) raised still more questions: Was the Administration violating the Congressional law by publishing and mailing out information on what the Sandinistas were doing?

### **Winking at the Problems**

From 1981 through 1985, when the public debate arose over aid being cut off by Congress via the Boland Amendment, the problem was that Congress, in the words of former National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane, was "winking." On the one hand, Congress was saying that it supported the program as a covert operation; but on the other hand, it was saying you can't do this and you can't that, and by the way, don't try to topple the government. During much of the early 1980s, Congressmen were not willing to say that they did not support

the program; but they were also not willing to say that they would support it for specified political purposes. As a result, the Resistance and the U.S. program continued to develop as a paramilitary operation—ostensibly covert in the United States, but overt in Central America—with unspecified political objectives and no clear, consistent political framework until late 1986.

The problems today thus derive from defining the U.S. program as a paramilitary operation and then trying to support an insurgency without allowing it proper political content. That content may not have been needed for a truly paramilitary operation, but it certainly was necessary for such an operation to convert itself into a national insurgent movement with its own political criteria, its own identity, and its own nationalism. The political context of the Nicaraguan Resistance was usually defined more in terms of U.S. interests and U.S. politics than in terms of Nicaraguan realities. And this was not confronted institutionally, politically, and publicly until mid-1986.

#### **THE GROWTH AND CHANGING CHARACTER OF THE RESISTANCE MOVEMENT**

The Nicaraguan Resistance of 1987 is very different from the Resistance of 1981.<sup>3</sup> In 1981, the movement consisted of less than 1,000 combatants of different origins. There were ex-Guardsmen who became senior leaders, regional and taskforce commanders, or simply combatants in the Resistance movement. There were ex-Sandinistas who did likewise. And there were disenchanted farmers and professionals who could not be considered ex-Somocistas, ex-Guardsmen, or ex-Sandinistas. Together, these diverse elements became the initial base of the movement.

By 1983, the Resistance grew to over 3,000. By 1985, there were over 12,000. And today there is an accounted force of over 15,000. Dramatic growth in the insurgency occurred between late 1982 and early 1985—the Sandinistas acquired MI-25 (Hind) attack helicopters from the Soviet Union in late 1984 and began operational use of them in early 1985. The rapid growth in the number of combatants was largely the product of the local effects of the Sandinistas' policies and behavior, the popular appeal of the Resistance, and modest levels of U.S. funding.

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<sup>3</sup>For additional information about some of the points made here about the changing nature of the Resistance, see *Nicaraguan Biographies: A Resource Book*, U.S. Department of State, Special Report No. 174, January 1988, and a related insert, "Background of Senior Resistance Military Leaders, November 1987."

The development of the Nicaraguan Resistance during this period remained largely hidden from public view because the U.S. government was trying to treat the Resistance as a covert paramilitary operation rather than as an overt national insurgency. Contrary to U.S. press reports, the political face of the Resistance was not reducible to individuals such as Adolfo Calero or Arturo Cruz, Sr. And the military face could not be reduced simply to Enrique Bermudez or a dozen ex-Guardsmen on the Strategic Command (the Resistance's general staff).

The Resistance has evolved continually, partly because of U.S. pressures. The only two personalities who have survived from 1980 to 1987 are Bermudez and Aristides Sanchez (a current member of the Resistance Directorate). The ex-Guardsmen, mostly colonels, who made up the original general staff are now gone. Those ex-Guardsmen who remain are the young lieutenants and enlisted personnel (privates, corporals, and sergeants). They account for less than 250 of the 15,000 combatants.

A positive result of this evolution is that the Resistance now has a broader social base and an increasingly integrated interface between its political and military leaders, which was until recently virtually nonexistent.

#### **A Broader Social Base: The Regional Taskforces and Family Networks**

The Resistance as a whole is built around the approximately 70 to 80 taskforce commanders and the 26 regional commanders who have spent most of their time *inside* Nicaragua. They are, for the most part, faceless, unknown to the outside world. They have conducted a largely hidden war, unlike a traditional guerrilla war that seeks to convert military action into overt political and psychological capital.

The regional and taskforce commanders are the heart of the Resistance. Neither they nor other leaders in the field are appointed by a military hierarchy or by individuals in Washington, Miami, or the Strategic Command. The taskforce leadership has surfaced out of what has taken place in the villages and provinces of rural Nicaragua. And what these leaders represent is a genuine, legitimate, indigenous, peasant guerrilla movement. This is the movement that has escaped the journalists and the analysts<sup>4</sup> and that gets ignored in the battle of ideological stereotypes, with the Reagan Administration identifying the Resistance as "freedom fighters," while the Sandinistas identify them as barbaric ex-Guardsmen.

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<sup>4</sup>Indeed, until recently, there was no encouragement and no practical way for the press to accompany troops on the ground.

Many of the taskforces (and their commanders) grew out of extended families. For example, the original regional command, known as Santiago Meza, was formed by five brothers. It grew in size from 50 combatants to 100, then to 800. Of the five brothers, only three survive—the command was named for the first brother killed. In this and other commands, the growth in numbers is a response to local conditions; it is driven by personalities and by extended family and village networks in rural Nicaragua.

Because the authority and leadership of many field commanders are based on extended family ties and related regional identities inside Nicaragua, the military leadership of the Strategic Command, not to mention the external political leadership of the Resistance, does not strongly influence the military front. The Resistance that has been developing inside Nicaragua is only loosely connected to the Resistance that presents itself in Washington and Miami. The political and military leaderships represent two very different realities.

While this is a problem, it is also one of the strengths of the Resistance. The diversity and independence of the field commanders run contrary to such objectives as having a national strategy, a central command, control, and communications system, and a coordinated, disciplined targeting strategy—all of which the United States has sought to provide through its training and support programs. But desirable as a centralized strategy and organization may be, one cannot be simply and quickly imposed on the field commanders without disrupting the family and regional identities and loyalties that motivate and inspire the people who are doing the actual fighting.

### **Grounds for Cautious Optimism**

What is different about the Resistance in 1987? For the first time, there is an open, public U.S. commitment of \$100 million, making it possible to plan resources, training, and tactical operations in the context of an overall strategy.

For the first time since 1984, the Resistance is in an offensive mood—and with good reason. Not only has the Resistance grown in size, but also, for the first time, over three-fourths (more than 12,000) of the combatants are in the field, with equipment, leadership, and a feeling that they are going to get continued funding. It is an ideal organization from the standpoint of its high "teeth-to-tail" ratio; for

every 100 combatants, there may be 5 noncombatants who provide support services.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, the Resistance is developing new leadership cadres and acquiring the technology and intelligence it needs to conduct guerrilla operations in Nicaragua. While the force expanded to 15,000 by 1986, there was no parallel expansion of the leadership. Thus, a taskforce that used to number 100 grew to number 300 but still had only 2 or 3 leaders. Combat was often a mob scene; the leaders did not have full control of combat operations. Now, however, the forces can break into smaller units. Also, they now have tactical radios with which to maintain secure communications, and they can be provided with real-time tactical intelligence—they are no longer blind in the field. Thus, a taskforce of 300 or 400 can be broken down into columns and groups and still operate as a taskforce.

Among other points worth noting, the Resistance commanders and fighters now have a targeting strategy. They have the maps and the information needed, and they are familiar with the terrain. The Resistance also has a radio station, *Radio Liberación*, which can reach about 90 percent of the Nicaraguan population 12 hours a day. And there are human-rights representatives with each taskforce and regional command in the field.

In short, there is now a logic to what the Resistance is trying to do. It may now be possible for the Resistance to move from the image of an American *program* to a *guerrilla movement* with its own Nicaraguan identity. In 1987, the Resistance became more Nicaraguan than U.S. in character.

### Persistent Problems

This is not to say that major problems do not remain, or that the Resistance could soon defeat the Sandinista regime. A better appreciation of what is happening at the taskforce level and below should raise limited expectations of military success, but no one should expect the Resistance to be in Managua this year. The Contras may be able to establish themselves militarily in 60 percent of the territory where 30 percent of the population resides (especially Zelaya, Matagalpa, Chontales, and Jinotega). The major obstacle in 1987 will be to translate battlefield success there into political success along the Pacific coast.

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<sup>5</sup>However, this also causes several problems: *politically* with regional allies, because intelligence, logistics, and other support elements are partly out of the hands of the Resistance; and *operationally* by creating an overdependence on U.S. resources and skills.

It is not clear what happens next, after the Resistance establishes a permanent presence in the rural areas.

The more serious long-term issues may be organizational and institutional: The bureaucracies involved in the U.S. program are often at odds, and the interface between the United States and the Nicaraguans is convoluted. If officials in the various U.S. bureaucracies cannot resolve their differences, then the Nicaraguans in the Resistance movement are also unlikely to do so. This has a marked effect on the definition of options, and it raises questions about how well organized the U.S. government is to support an insurgency like that of the Resistance. Finally, critics quickly and repeatedly point out that the U.S. government is not well suited to support paramilitary efforts and that the CIA's capabilities in the paramilitary area are geared to small operations, not to supporting an insurgency that resembles an army.

The Contras themselves are also rife with internal problems of disunity that affect strategy and operations. One of the major tasks they face is that of institutionalizing the relationship between the political and military fronts of the Resistance. Tensions exist between military and political leaders, and there are breaches between the senior leadership of the Strategic Command and the field commanders. For example, the idea of negotiations is treasonous to many field commanders; they cannot accept war-fighting as a tool of negotiations. The ones who are prepared to enter into negotiations are to be found *outside* of Nicaragua.

Finally, Enrique Bermudez has allowed considerable (according to some critics, too much) leeway in how the regional and taskforce commanders carry out operational orders. In time, better training may lead to more centralized, coordinated control over strategy, targeting, and other decisions that in the past have been left in the hands of individual field commanders.

## CONCLUDING COMMENT

To conclude, I would like to note that compared with other anti-communist insurgencies around the world (e.g., in Angola and Afghanistan), the Contras are the most democratic and the least abusive in terms of human rights. They are also increasingly effective in their operations, have increasingly good prospects of success, and fit well with overall U.S. foreign policy goals. Yet, in terms of U.S. foreign policy debate, they are the most criticized and are given the least prospect of success.

Despite the problems I have noted, and barring negotiations to end the Central American conflict, U.S. support for the Nicaraguan Resistance remains the option that keeps the Administration from more extreme options, e.g., U.S. military intervention or disengagement from the region. The Contras also remain a low-risk, low-cost option for now—the “cheapest option”—compared with others such as military intervention or “active containment.” The disappearance of this option can have only detrimental effects on U.S. foreign policy interests, the regional politics of Central America, and the Nicaraguans themselves.

### POSTSCRIPT

On February 3, 1988, the Democratic leadership of the U.S. House of Representatives led an effort to defeat further military aid funding for the Resistance. On March 23, political and military representatives of the Sandinistas and the Resistance signed a ceasefire agreement at Sapoá, Nicaragua. Since then, Congress has approved humanitarian assistance to the Resistance as long as negotiations continue. Meanwhile, the Soviets continue to supply the Sandinistas with weapons and ammunition and continue military construction activities at naval and air facilities. Cuban, as well as Soviet-bloc, personnel continue operational support of Sandinista army and State Security (DGSE) operations against the Resistance throughout Nicaragua. Four negotiating sessions under the supervision of Cardinal Obando y Bravo and OAS General Secretary Baena Soares resulted in no final political settlement.

## THE STRATEGIC POVERTY OF THE REAGAN ADMINISTRATION'S VISION IN NICARAGUA<sup>1</sup>

Arturo J. Cruz, Jr.

By the middle of 1982, the Reagan Administration had reached two fundamental conclusions regarding the situation in Central America. On the one hand, they did not consider it possible to arrive at an understanding with Managua on the Salvadoran question, as Thomas Enders had tried to do in August 1981 and Ambassador Quainton had tried at the beginning of 1982. On the other hand, the Contra movement, which the Administration had conceived in principle as an instrument of pressure to be used at will on the Sandinistas, had grown quantitatively beyond the expectations of its creators and had evolved into a peasant army. Both of these conclusions must be regarded as expressions of the Administration's "ideological blindness."

The Sandinistas did not have any interest in arriving at a Pax Finlandia, such as Enders had proposed. The commanders started from the proposition that the victory of the Salvadoran guerrilla—in spite of the failure of the "Final Offensive"—was just around the corner. El Salvador represented the terrain where the course of Central American events would be decided immediately. Washington was as convinced of this as Managua. Therefore, no possibility of a basic accord between the Sandinistas and the Reagan Administration existed while the Salvadoran question remained up in the air, without being "resolved" militarily. Furthermore, the Contras had grown from being a mere tool of U.S. policy into an army with a very complex social base. The Contra army encompassed a great variety of "natural leaders": sergeants from the old Somocista guard, "cornfield warriors," peasant families, and local leaders, not to mention the self-appointed heads of the hierarchy.

The rebellion of these "natural leaders"—like every rural rebellion—arose from a purely instinctive, anarchic impulse, without ideological coherency. These people fought for land, for their individual traditions, and to be left in peace; they also fought for their religion. In a certain sense, the Contras were a resurrection of the Cristeros, the Mexican movement of the first part of the century.

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<sup>1</sup>For further analysis, see Arturo Cruz, Jr., "One Hundred Years of Turpitude," *The New Republic*, Vol. 197, No. 20, November 16, 1987, pp. 26-36.

By the end of 1982, the "two-track policy" of the Reagan Administration was dead. The Administration proceeded to a qualitative leap in its policies toward Nicaragua. It abandoned its posture of active containment and, for the first time, fantasized about overturning the "revolutionary process." By then, a train of intellectual baggage had been harnessed to the Reagan doctrine, with the object of giving a coherent expression to the instincts of the President. The Reagan doctrine became the intellectual cathedral of the Administration. The foundation of this doctrine was the postulate that not only was it possible to contain the expansionist impulses of the Soviet Union, it was also possible to reverse the Soviet advances in the Third World, from Afghanistan to Angola in Africa, and of course in Nicaragua as well. A corollary of the Reagan doctrine should have been that even if it were not possible to turn back the Soviet advances with these new anti-communist movements, at least the movements would serve as means of exerting pressure—the cornerstone of what one could call a strategy of "cheap containment."

But in spite of the fact that for the first time the men of the Reagan Administration had been bold enough to take off on a flight of strategic fancy and to move from the defensive to the offensive, the Administration decisionmakers were convinced that the time factor worked against them and their Nicaraguan clients. It was necessary to consider the totalitarian nature of the Sandinista regime, which gave the Sandinistas a comparative advantage over the "bland dictatorships" in the management of the mechanisms for social control. Furthermore, one had to take into account the firm ties the Sandinistas were forming with the socialist camp, which enabled them to count on reliable allies who had a sense of continuity in foreign policy commitments to continue strengthening the organs of power in the revolutionary state. By contrast, the counterrevolution could count only on the support of the U.S. President and the opposition of the U.S. Congress, a situation that forced its leadership to satisfy the broadest expectations within the narrowest of temporary constraints. Within the Administration, this created a craving for instantaneous results: The saying was, "Victory by next December."

Within this "general logic," it was impossible to maintain a long-term strategy. Quite to the contrary, the emphasis was on instant gratification. The lack of discipline of the American political system—its lack of internal cohesion—necessarily determined the type of war that the Contras had to carry out. In this scheme, there was no other alternative but the short-term push, given that the general logic of the American system always led the Congress, the press, and other political elites to scrutinize the actions of the Contras as they would review the

quarterly report of a commercial business. This constraint eventually led to tactics of conventional warfare: the formation of regular armies with "professional officers," ad hoc raids, creative banditry, and grand schemes of striking the Pacific coast directly.

The hope of the Reagan Administration—a hope never articulated coherently—was, in a sense, to reverse a film of the last days of Somoza. The object was to repeat the Sandinista experience against Somoza "in reverse," isolating the Sandinistas internationally with the help of the Organization of American States (OAS) and subduing them with a classical guerrilla war across three war fronts: the northern, with remnants of the old guard as the principal theater of operations, the southern, and the Atlantic coast. There was also the never-realized possibility of creating a fourth "internal front" in the main cities to prepare for a great urban insurrection. The unknown factor in this equation was Eden Pastora and his potential to provoke ruptures, not only within the Sandinista militias, but also in the very ranks of the Sandinista Popular Army (EPS). In the minds of the Reagan Administration, the participation of the Nicaraguans was not going to be sufficient in itself; this was an East-West conflict, and therefore there would also have to be direct U.S. participation. Why, therefore, not mine the Nicaraguan harbors and give the *coup de grace* to an economy virtually scuttled by Sandinista mismanagement? This war was not of the usual sort. The men of Reagan's Administration fought the Sandinistas as if they were fighting Hitler's Germany in the days when Bill Casey was still a young man in the OSS. Yet the American people's perception of the enemy—even when not persuaded to think of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) as the victim—was far less clear than the Administration's, and it certainly lacked the Administration's disquieting intensity.

The Administration's plan had no room in it for tactical flexibility—the political suppleness needed to take advantage of the opportunities in a very dynamic situation. There was simply no time to speak of a historical compromise, or to explore diplomatic channels, or to prepare a "peace offensive," before having to turn once again to a war that had no legitimacy. Out of this obsession with a military solution, men of action but little imagination emerged as strategic figureheads, while civilians like Arturo Cruz, Sr., were allied by necessity. The Administration cast Cruz in the same role the Sandinistas had cast him in, as a tactical prop. This was partly because of ideological mistrust, but also because he did not fit into their short-term strategy. According to the Americans, there was no time to strip the Sandinistas of power by means of "elections" or to search for "political solutions" to the national conflict.

This haste to overturn the Sandinistas had its merits, especially if one considers the promises of a rapid victory that the Americans had made to the countries of the region. But this haste would also cause them to lose the propaganda war. The Reagan Administration gave no show of tactical flexibility until it was too late. Therefore, after the Enders initiative, they lost the opportunity to play the diplomatic game easily. The unpardonable error of secretly mining Nicaraguan harbors in October 1983 reawakened the primeval hostility of Latin America; it created the Contadora process and handed to the Sandinistas a diplomatic shield to buy time and nourish their military strength—precisely the opposite of what the Reagan Administration sought with its policy of war without quarter.

At this point, Congress and the Reagan Administration parted ways, but the American right wing moved in rapidly to fill some of the void that Congress had left. In spite of the Congressional cutoff of aid, the Administration remained confident in its short-term strategy: President Reagan stood firm on the question of Nicaragua, in a way that no one could imagine at the beginning of the adventure. And finally, in the course of time, the Sandinistas showed their true colors. This left the apologists for Sandinismo in an indefensible position. They had no course left but to concentrate on attacking the counter-revolution, its low credibility as a democratic alternative, and its supposed incapacity to win militarily.

Thus, the defenders of the old formula felt no need to make substantial revisions in either its postulates or its Nicaraguan allies. At most, they spoke of reform within the Contras, but only in order to get the \$27 million from the U.S. Congress. The Reagan Administration continued to believe the Contras had to win "next year."

This fixation strengthened the hand of the military in the Contra regular armies that were engaged in conventional warfare. The Americans rejected the option of forming political cadres, preferring efficient managers who were insensitive to the complexities of societies in transition and who lacked the skill to create a sounding board that would magnify and enhance the political effect abroad of the military actions of the Resistance in Nicaragua. More to the point, the Administration never made a serious effort to achieve even minimal consensus between the two parties. They felt the magic of the President on their side, a nostrum to which they could turn whenever necessary. In any case, the elusive bipartisan consensus also implied reform within the Contras: a qualitative leap, by which the Resistance would transcend its origins as a proxy force and transform itself into an authentic national liberation movement.

The reasoning of the Administration profoundly modified the behavior of the Contra leaders. The Nicaraguans accepted as an article of faith that one could win in the short term. Anyone who dared question this article of faith was accused immediately of the most contemptible heresy. The convictions of the President, as well as his rhetoric, had convinced many that as a last resort, the U.S. Marines could be called upon to intervene at any moment. Therefore, political options were allowed to languish by the Nicaraguans, who had never learned how to defeat the "con game" of the Contadora process, and who never had the patience or political culture to play the election game.

The leaders of the Contras believed that the near certainty of an eventual intervention made all of this a superfluous, even criminal, exercise. In their fantasies, intervention could occur at any time; anything having to do with "negotiations" or "political solutions" served only to delay the liberation of Nicaragua. The Nicaraguans said with great hopes after the mining and the blockade, "Something has to happen." But nothing did.

Thus, over time, the military solution came to be considered the only legitimate one in the fight against Managua. The political activity of the Resistance did not go beyond anti-communist denunciations, encrusted in the hysterical political terminology of the 1950s, with no sensitivity to the changes that had taken place in the previous two decades.

The Nicaraguans fell into the trap of their own wishful thinking. And, what is worse, they fell into Managua's trap, since with the blockade, it managed to justify its economic disaster to the world. And, irony of ironies, if the leaders of the counterrevolution had been more flexible, the Sandinistas would have had to be more intransigent. The search for negotiations with Managua—which was implicitly seeking symmetry in the eyes of the international community between the Salvadoran guerrilla movement and the Nicaraguan Resistance—languished; yet this is where, paradoxically, the "legitimacy" of the counterrevolution was to be found.

The magical return from exile, thanks to imperial fiat, dominated the horizon of the leaders of the counterrevolution. "Political activity," to them, amounted to setting up an "electoral machinery," in order to be prepared after intervention for what was envisioned as a rapid, almost magical transition process from a provisional to an "elected" government. This stimulated an "electoral mindset" among the leaders of the counterrevolution, yet they lacked the corresponding ability to unite behind a democratic vanguard which would direct their actions. The result was that the old politicians and their traditional parties—

people who were already obsolete at the time of Somoza—were revived. New movements and political blocs were created, yet they merely reshuffled the materials of the old. This gave the impression of being a divided movement that acted in an anarchic manner, rent by personal feuds; divided between “good Contras” and “bad Contras,” between “authentic Miskitos” and “lying Miskitos.”

Even worse, as a consequence of this “electoral mindset,” the political superstructure and the peasant social base of the Resistance became completely divorced. The Contras proved incapable of making an organic integration of the political and military cadres. And while the leaders of the counterrevolution were beginning their “electoral campaign” with tributes in Miami hotels, the FSLN feverishly consolidated its internal leadership with the “election” of Daniel Ortega to the Presidency and the confirmation of Humberto Ortega as the Commander-in-Chief of the EPS. The Sandinistas began introducing helicopters and better military materiel in early 1985, while elaborating a complete doctrine of counterinsurgency, which not only called for better war materiel but also talked of an “agrarian reform of counterinsurgency,” in which new agricultural cooperatives would be the first line of defense against the Contras.

Naturally, in the war of images, the Contras had been perceived by the international community as the illegitimate war of a “proxy” force without bases of social support and incapable of stepping forward as an authentic national liberation movement. The Contra combatants projected themselves as “Nicaraguan Rambos,” a Creole rendition of the “soldier of fortune,” whereas the Sandinistas could camouflage their Soviet tanks with the dove of peace and the socialist rose.

The internal nature of the conflict between the Nicaraguan people, with their yearnings for democracy, and the Sandinista Front, with its totalitarian vocation, has been obscured by the apparently heroic drama of a small, poor country with its young vanguard battling against the heartless, reactionary giant of the North. Latin America had a magnificent excuse for avoiding the question of democracy, considering it superfluous to the Nicaraguan context when measured against the survival of the so-called revolutionary process and its “social conquests” in the midst of a “war of aggression,” of “sovereignty” against “imperialism.”

The Contras have to change the terms of the debate. They must modernize their political language and maintain a flexible attitude, always ready to search for peace, which in any case is not possible without democratic openness on the part of the Sandinistas. The members of the new Resistance have to become fluent in the language of international politics, to look for ways to become part of all the

diplomatic processes—Contadora and the Arias Plan—and they must show undeniable stature in the civil society of the Central American democracies. The Resistance must not miss the opportunity to demand symmetry between itself and the Salvadoran guerrillas. It must challenge Daniel Ortega to act as Napoleon Duarte and to do in Nicaragua what Duarte has already done in El Salvador through the Las Palmas meetings in search of a dialogue.

The Resistance has to enter the war of ideas. It has to search for cultural hegemony and be capable of attracting prominent intellectuals in Latin America who have declared themselves to be militants for democracy and have rejected the Cuban model. These intellectuals have to become militants for the Nicaraguan cause. For this to happen, the people of the Resistance must spend time with them. The Resistance must patiently explain the nature of the contradictions in Nicaraguan society, with its objective needs for democratic institutions, and the Sandinista Front, whose ideological agenda does not permit any kind of meaningful openness. In this struggle for cultural hegemony, it is not enough to be preoccupied with the geopolitics of the Soviet presence in Nicaragua. One has to question the Sandinistas' agrarian reform as a typical "agrarian reform of counterinsurgency"; it is necessary to explain what has happened to the real wages of the workers, the "gains of labor," which have been stolen by the "Lord of the Revolution." And it is necessary to ask what has happened to the small landowners and the minorities, from the blacks to the Miskitos to the Monimbo Indians. They should invite the Jesse Jacksons to come to the Atlantic coast and speak with the Bluefields settlers. The Resistance must take advantage of the Nicaraguan refugees and "make them theirs," as the Salvadoran guerrillas have succeeded to a great extent in doing with the refugees of their country.

The Resistance has to broaden the political base of its army, showing peasant faces and allowing the youthfulness of its combatants to stand out, inviting comparisons between the Nicaraguan guerrilla and the Salvadoran guerrilla. It must become an authentic movement of national liberation and stop being perceived as a "task force" of the American army. Each bullet that is fired in the mountains of Nicaragua must be heard in Managua and in the streets of Stockholm. But this requires moving from the vapid language of the "Sandino-Comunistas" to a lofty language that sends a constructive message, and it requires new faces capable of articulating the new message. The Resistance has to project an image of unity—no one can be excluded in a commitment to institutionality—and a social contract that takes into account democratic militancy.

The Resistance has to work toward a great bipartisan consensus in the United States. It has to become a permanent part of the American budget, and it cannot continue being subject to the circular arguments of the U.S. Congress, since these arguments weaken, divide, and demoralize the movement. The Resistance has to be capable of demonstrating visible successes in the summer of 1987, of showing that it has been able to substantially modify the "correlation of forces," and that it has bettered its record on human rights. Above all, it cannot fall into the trap of having to "win" or "lose" this year, since there are many ways of defining successes and victories.

To bring all this about, the Resistance has to move from the logic of electoral politics to the logic of insurrectional politics. There has to be an integration of the military elements and political elements, and there have to be elements with an urban origin who will be disposed to serve together with the peasant commanders. But this also requires at least a minimum of organization, and appropriate doctrine and strategy. It is necessary to form a democratic vanguard capable of confronting a formidable enemy, a Leninist vanguard in power.

The Resistance requires the discipline of managers, but the imagination of poets. To change their image from that of losers to that of winners, they have to radically change their concept of stages and define more modest objectives. If they continue insisting on winning "next year" before "Reagan leaves," and on having an urban insurrection within six months, they will be seen as losers, and what is more, they will lose. They must prepare to survive the Reagan presidency, and they must look for that great consensus in American society, convincing the world that their war is the "good war." They must also convince a half-million Nicaraguans in exile, the peasant army, and the Nicaraguan people to prepare to join their vanguard in difficult times, so that in the end they can carry them to victory.

## THE NICARAGUAN RESISTANCE IN TRANSITION<sup>1</sup>

Rene Herrera

The Nicaraguan Resistance is going through a transition period, about which I am going to make three basic observations:

- It is emerging from a period in which its policies responded to U.S. values and priorities, rather than to its own needs. This created many contradictions, tensions, and inefficiencies within the Resistance—especially with regard to the relationship between the civil and the military elements.
- The Resistance is now going through a reorganization that is creating a more stable relationship between the civil and military elements, and a more open and broadly based political framework. It continues to meet U.S. political demands (such as pluralism and democratic representation), but now, more important, it is strengthening its own internal capacity for facing the Sandinistas.
- Given the success of the Resistance in reorganizing and in broadening its scope, the foundation has been laid for conducting a more effective strategy. The effectiveness of that strategy will depend, however, on the capacity to maintain sound communication and coordination among the civil and military elements and the diverse groups composing the Resistance.

This analysis focuses primarily on the political crisis within the Nicaraguan Resistance. The crisis resulted from applying the political values of a highly institutionalized society, the United States, to a rebel movement of a society with a political culture that is historically resistant to institutionality (Nicaragua). I shall discuss how this crisis affects the structure of the military struggle against the Sandinistas, and I shall suggest a possible solution in the form of a new politico-military strategy for the Resistance.

The strategy followed until mid-1987 was to separate the political and military structures, giving each group different tasks in different scenarios. With the creation of the United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO) in June 1985, the political structure was oriented toward

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<sup>1</sup>Translated from a draft in Spanish presented at the conference, and edited for publication.

satisfying the requirements of the U.S. political culture to obtain the political backing and military aid needed to develop an anti-Sandinista military structure.

Given the conditions of the struggle against *Sandinismo* and the need for support from the United States, the strategy of separate responsibilities was appropriate, but it has had serious problems—to the point that political efforts are now in a state of permanent crisis. The cause of the crisis, in my judgment, is that in practice the military and political structures were not really separate, because the conditions for separation did not exist. The decision to combine these unequal leaderships and organizations into an alliance in which they would be theoretically equal was necessary, but it was made in response to the internal political debate in the United States, rather than because of any affinity among the leaders themselves.

The application of the values of a highly institutionalized society to a rebel movement that was subject to difficult operating conditions, where homogeneity, unity of command, discipline, and ideological fidelity were necessary for survival, led to an inevitable clash between those *without* military responsibilities or commands who were trying to build a pluralistic political structure and those who had the responsibility of military command. And it was even worse when former Sandinistas within the Resistance framed their legitimacy in the rejection of the military strategy promoted by the latter. Such an alliance among unequals could hardly have been expected to function. But it was necessary to obtain support for continuing the military struggle that was under way. The only way to resolve—or at least minimize—the problems of an alliance of unequals was to separate the political structure from the military structure, while applying safeguards for the protection of the military sector within the political structure. By establishing in the constitution of the alliance that the integral parties would neither lose their organizational identity nor abandon their military command structures, unity confirmed inequality. This inequality in military power soon translated itself into inequality in political power.

The alliance had hardly begun when the inequality of power became the dominant variable in the activities of the Resistance political structure. Each crisis led to new conflicts: The crisis of August 1985 was followed by those of October and November of the same year, which in turn led to a larger one in April and May 1986. By year's end, signs of a deeper rupture that would take place in 1987 began to appear. The approval of U.S. military aid and the rapid reactivation of military operations within Nicaragua imposed a different dynamic on political events. With their command unity and hierarchy threatened, and harassed by the political pressure of adversaries in the United States

who constantly degraded them in a rhetoric which the political allies within the Resistance not only did not refute, but at times fed, the combatants took the initiative to reassert their own role.

A more active and successful military sector, better trained and more confident in its strategy, became less vulnerable to exile power conflicts. The resignation of Arturo Cruz demonstrated this point. At the same time, mediation by the military sector's representatives on the Political Directorate became less necessary, as was revealed by Adolfo Calero's departure. But on the offensive level of penetrating more national territory and augmenting its extensive operational activities, the military sector needed, more than ever, a representative and stable political front with which it could build a relationship that would be more institutional than factional.

The great challenge that the crisis of January to March 1987 presented was that of finding a formula that would stabilize political conduct and also bring about a more stable relationship with the military sector. This formula would have to include a broadening of the political base of the movement, which would give representation but would also make it easy to remove the obstacles to a more institutional relationship between the two sectors.

The negotiations proceeded to broaden the movement and to fix rules for political and military relations and decisionmaking. The military could not be subordinated to the civilian sector within a rebel movement in which the latter would not share the ends and objectives of war; thus the military leadership felt its command authority threatened. Above all, it was necessary to search for a way to foster a common identification of values, so that subordination would not constitute a permanent problem.

For the first time, one of the crises of the Nicaraguan Resistance revealed the two levels that had nurtured it since 1985: (1) the necessity to adapt to political values such as pluralism, democracy, representative politics, legitimacy, and the subordination of the military to civilian authorities; and (2) the necessity for the application of those values not to constitute a capricious source of instability and uncertainty in the allocation of resources and the structure of the military command.

To address these two levels of conflict, political and military leaders had to work together to restructure the Resistance in a way that would maintain a positive image for the U.S. Congress and also achieve the necessary degree of efficiency. For this, a positive relationship between political and military leaders was indispensable.

The negotiations, which began by addressing the requirements for obtaining military aid from the United States, have gone beyond that and have produced a more stable, secure, and thus efficient structure.

Under the pressure and urgency of getting aid in 1987, when the situation in the United States made it difficult, the political and military sectors of the Resistance have shared the responsibility of making changes, using a mechanism of integration of perspectives rather than confrontation and forced accommodation. If the initial intention was to create a strategy to gain the support of the U.S. Congress, the result is much more than that: The Nicaraguan Resistance has emerged fortified in the face of the Sandinistas.

What are the results of the negotiations and why do I believe that a more stable and secure project has emerged? I have noted eight inter-related points that affirm this conclusion:

- The intermediary political role of the military in the Directorate disappears with the conversion of the FDN (Nicaraguan Democratic Forces) into the Army of the Resistance. Its political mandate also disappears. There is no FDN President and Commander-in-Chief acting in the same capacity as the head of the Political Directorate. Calero has returned to the Directorate of the new Nicaraguan Resistance through the Conservative party, and Aristides Sanchez, also of the FDN, has moved to the Directorate of the Nicaraguan Resistance through the Liberal party.
- The appointment of Enrique Bermudez to Chief of the Army of the Resistance, with the full recognition of the Political Directorate, places him in a subordinate institutional relationship to the Directorate. This is similar to those existing in the organizations of the modern state. His removal or substitution remains subject to an internal ruling that must be approved by both sectors.
- The establishment of rules drawn up by both civil and military leaders generates a guarantee of command stability in both political and military matters. The behavior of the principal actors in the struggle becomes predictable.
- The predictability of political behavior and the behavior of the Joint Military Chiefs is acquired with the establishment of an accord. None of the members of the new Directorate or the Chiefs of the Front can be members of the provisional government, and none of the members of the government can be candidates for the presidency or the vice-presidency of the republic in the general elections of the country.
- The predictability of political behavior automatically diminishes the tensions and the temptations for power struggles within the Directorate and between the Political Directorate and the

military chiefs. This predictability opens up the way for more effective and transparent efforts.

- The creation of institutional political mechanisms through the fortifying of the larger and more representative Assembly of the Resistance favors a more sophisticated and credible political development.
- The establishment of rules of succession within the body of the Directorate eliminates the power to create crises which the directors formerly had. The number of members of the Directorate is increased from three to seven, and the members are subject to frequent ratification by those they represent, i.e., the current political parties or sectors, which nominate them through the Resistance Assembly.
- The adoption of this strategy permits the incorporation of new political groups and organizations without giving them the power or force to create crises. The combined participation of these organizations in the negotiations permitted the development of a psychology of participation and the sharing of responsibilities that made possible the establishment of rules that are acceptable to virtually all factions within the Resistance. The incorporation of the Southern Opposition Bloc (BOS) in the Directorate and in the Assembly, as well as the incorporation of other political groups within the Assembly, facilitates the political integration of the Resistance. Also, as it becomes more pluralistic and participative, the movement gains greater political and military efficiency.

Given the nature of the Resistance movement, which has suffered from the oscillations of U.S. policy and attacks by many political factions of the Nicaraguan opposition itself, it is significant that the political leaders have worked with the military leaders in a process of intense, extensive negotiation and have been able to communicate their differences and their perspectives for resolving them. The personal and constant presence of Enrique Bermudez in the negotiations has enabled direct communication [between the military and political fronts of the Resistance].

The prospects are good—there is reason to conclude that the Resistance now has better prospects than it has had at any time in its history. For the first time, the Sandinistas will have to confront a Resistance that is increasingly legitimate and effective. We hope that the Americans who play key roles in the decision to extend aid to the Resistance will appreciate these recent efforts and will extend firm and constant support.

## **SANDINISTA STRATEGY: THE OBJECT IS SURVIVAL<sup>1</sup>**

Colonel Alden Cunningham

The Sandinistas, who pose a clear threat to U.S. interests in creating a stable environment for democratic and socioeconomic development in Central America, are increasingly confident of ultimate triumph in two wars: the ongoing war against the insurgents, and the one they most fear—an invasion by the United States.

### **THE STRATEGIC CHALLENGE: DEFEAT THE INTERVENTION BEFORE IT OCCURS**

The principal pillars upon which the Sandinistas' power rests are stronger than ever. The Popular Sandinista Army (EPS) has improved steadily in the last two years, especially in its capacity to wage a counterinsurgent war. The state security apparatus, the Ministry of Interior's General Directorate of State Security (DGSE), is widely recognized as streamlined, efficient, and "on a roll" in terms of controlling and eliminating pro-Resistance support and the internal opposition. Finally, Soviet and Eastern bloc military support continues at high levels. Military and military-associated cargo deliveries broke previous highs in 1986, making it a banner year, with roughly 23,000 metric tons provided. Some 2,500 Cuban military advisers assist in planning and training for both wars at all command levels, from EPS headquarters down to battalion.<sup>2</sup>

Another reason for Sandinista confidence is the increasing fragility of the recently forged bipartisan consensus to provide direct U.S. military and humanitarian assistance to the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance (NDR). Loss of control of the Senate by the Republican party and the impact of the Iran affair on Presidential credibility make it

<sup>1</sup>This is an abridged version of the presentation given at the seminar; the full presentation included advice for negotiating a political solution to end the conflict in Central America. An expanded and updated version of this paper has been published as "U.S. Strategic Options in Nicaragua," *Parameters*, Vol. 18, No. 1, March 1988, pp. 60-72. (*Parameters* is a quarterly publication of the U.S. Army War College.)

<sup>2</sup>Interview with U.S. State Department officials and the author's observations while serving as U.S. Defense and Army Attaché in Nicaragua from May 1985 to December 1986.

more difficult for the President to obtain funds to support the Resistance in the FY88 budget. The Sandinistas know this and thus are increasingly confident that what they most fear—a bipartisan U.S. consensus on Nicaragua—will not be sustainable. For the moment, it appears that Sandinista confidence is well placed.

The Sandinistas' strategic objective is to survive, to consolidate completely their political/ideological hold on Nicaragua. They are using a combination of military, political, diplomatic, psychosocial, and economic concepts and resources to achieve this goal.

### **SANDINISTA MILITARY STRATEGY FOR COUNTERINSURGENT OPERATIONS: DEFEND FORWARD**

The Sandinistas must focus on two wars—an ongoing counterinsurgent war and a potential conventional conflict phasing into an irregular war in the event of a U.S. military intervention. While they publicly declare that a U.S. invasion is more likely because of Resistance weakness, the Sandinistas understand that EPS success in the counterinsurgent war makes a U.S. invasion less likely, because the rebels would have failed to develop sufficient legitimacy to make the political costs of such an action acceptable for the United States.

In the counterinsurgency effort now being waged in the mountains of northern Nicaragua, the marshes and jungles of Zelaya province, and the hills 50 to 100 miles east of Managua, the EPS tactic is to defend as far forward as possible. The idea is to make the Resistance fight their way into Nicaragua, giving them no rest in their Honduran base camps or, for that matter, inside Nicaragua. The tactic is to make it very difficult for the Resistance to mass effectively around important political, military, and economic targets.

The EPS has taken advantage of the two-year hiatus in U.S. government military support from September 1984 to October 1986 to make major improvements in its force capability. The EPS counterinsurgent force structure, numbering some 35,000 to 45,000, has improved considerably with the formation of 13 or more irregular warfare battalions (BLIs), 12 or more light hunter battalions (BCLs), and 5,000 frontier guard troops. The BLIs operate from home-base areas but can be sent anywhere in the national territory. The BCLs have probably half as many troops as the BLIs, with some 200 to 300 men, and are more lightly armed. They usually are assigned to a specific infantry brigade and thus have a more limited operational area to cover. The frontier guard units, as their name implies, patrol the borders and try to pick up rebel forces as far forward as possible.

Command and control have also improved with increasing use of infantry brigade headquarters to fight the principal battles. The chain of command runs from EPS Headquarters in Managua to the military region commands in the war zone and down to the brigades (see map below). The brigades also control militia and reserve battalions and permanent territorial companies, which have a more static mission in defense of state farms, towns, bridges, and lines of communication.

The firepower and mobility of the EPS have also improved over the past two years. With the doubling of the helicopter force from 6 Hinds and 15 Hips to 12 Hinds and 35 Hips and the addition of between 1,000 and 2,000 trucks in 1986 alone, the Sandinista armed forces have



Military regions

gained increased mobility in the counterinsurgency war as well as in preparation for the conventional defense of the Pacific coast and Managua. More helicopter deliveries are expected in 1987. Increased numbers of air defense weapons, primarily ZU-23s, have improved air defense capabilities, especially against rebel aerial resupply efforts. Rumors of the introduction of SA-3s and other missiles such as the SA-9 system have been denied by high-ranking EPS officers. The use of women in air defense units as shown at the SUBTIABA 86 exercises in Military Region II near Somotillo along the Honduran border also points to maximum use of personnel resources.<sup>3</sup> Increased reliance on and better use of field artillery, especially the BM-21 multiple-launch rocket system, have also helped the Sandinistas on the battlefield.

EPS use of intelligence is excellent. Through both infiltration of Resistance ranks and strategic and tactical signal intercepts, the EPS generally has a very good idea of guerrilla plans, intentions, and targets, including the location and timing of National Resistance Army (NRA) aerial resupply efforts to forces inside Nicaragua.

By early 1987, the EPS had managed to give the appearance of dominating the NRA throughout Nicaragua, leaving the Resistance with little credibility as a military force. As of late summer 1987, the NRA, numbering roughly 18,000 men and women and organized into three separate fronts with the help of the \$100 million received from the United States in the fall of 1986, was continuing its military and political development. The EPS has not yet succeeded in neutralizing the Resistance, and the Resistance has stepped up its harassment of government forces and is beginning to attack increasingly important economic and military targets. Nevertheless, while NRA operations have created a major strain on Sandinista attention and resources, the NRA has not yet managed to create the perception that it is an effective military force.

There is a possibility, however, that a focused strategy will allow the NRA a chance to strike significant blows against the EPS, the DGSE, and perhaps even the Soviet and Cuban presence in Nicaragua—the principal pillars of Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) support. Allegedly, high EPS desertion rates may reflect low morale, which might decline further with greater rebel capability and battlefield successes to the point where whole EPS units might desert. The Sandinistas might then be forced to moderate significantly or flee.

On the negative side, although EPS desertion rates are relatively high, many deserters are found and returned to their units. The

<sup>3</sup>Julia Preston, "Gringos Defeated in War Games," *Washington Post*, December 21, 1986, pp. 1, 33.

Sandinistas have also shown that they can demobilize troops and recruit new ones, thus maintaining their force levels. Morale in some units may be low, while in other units it is high, according to reports by individuals who have accompanied EPS units in the field and my own discussions with EPS soldiers. "GI Bill"-type benefits recently announced by the FSLN for active duty soldiers who complete two years of mandatory service should help morale. Finally, patriotic military service is viewed with less fear, as potential recruits see their predecessors demobilized. The war is obviously no picnic, but most survive it. Many of the recruits live better in the armed forces than they do at home. Being in the EPS also gives many an importance they would not otherwise have. It enhances their "macho" image.

On balance, the claims of both sides are probably exaggerated. The EPS has improved, and for the past 6 to 8 months, so has the NRA. This means, in effect, that the war continues to be stalemated, with neither side capable of making a decisive breakthrough. As long as the NRA cannot break out of the mountains and marshes of Jinotega and Zelaya departments to strike significant political and military targets in more visible areas, this stalemate favors the FSLN, with its commitment and its organizational/mobilization capabilities.

#### **SANDINISTA MILITARY STRATEGY FOR CONVENTIONAL OPERATIONS: POPULAR OR PEOPLE'S WAR**

With respect to the conventional defense of the Pacific coast and Managua, the EPS has developed a "people's war" concept which relies heavily on the use of regular forces backed up by large numbers of reserves. In October 1985, the EPS formalized the voluntary reserves into a mandatory system encompassing conscripts from the 25- to 40-year-old age group. There were at least 18 reserve light infantry brigades represented by 200-man marching formations at the November 8, 1986, parade marking the 25th anniversary of the founding of the FSLN. At a conservative estimate, there are probably 22,000 reservists organized to defend the Pacific coast and Managua (Military Regions II, III, and IV). Permanent forces would probably add another 10,000 to 20,000 tanker, mechanized infantry, artillery, air defense, signal, medical, engineer, transportation, quartermaster, air, and naval units as the structure around which the reserve light infantry units would coalesce.

Local militia forces form the final component of the conventional defense concept. There may be some 30,000 militia organized to add

depth to the battlefield and theoretically require U.S. forces to fight for every square inch of Nicaraguan territory. The general plan would be to fight conventionally as long as possible, then fade into an irregular-type war, harassing the occupying forces at every opportunity.

Without Soviet, Eastern bloc, and Cuban military advisers and materiel support, the EPS would not be nearly as effective in the conduct of the counterinsurgency or in its preparations to counter a U.S. military intervention. The number of Cuban advisers remains high in comparison with the U.S. military advisory effort in El Salvador. By the Sandinistas' own count, there are 500 purely military Cuban advisers in Nicaragua. The United States claims a much higher figure—around 2,500 Cuban military advisers. Soviet and Eastern bloc materiel support reached record levels in 1985. It is unrealistic to expect that if Resistance pressure increases, Soviet support will decrease—in fact, the opposite is more likely. When the U.S. House of Representatives reversed itself and passed the \$100 million aid package in June 1986, Soviet merchant ships delivered 8,000 to 10,000 metric tons of supplies, including MI-8/17 and MI-25 helicopters, through the Port of Corinto in the four-month period from July to October 1986.

#### **STATE SECURITY: THE NAME OF THE GAME IS CONTROL**

The DGSE plays a crucial role in controlling insurgency. It effectively separated the Resistance from the people through the relocation of *campesinos* who supported the guerrillas and through repression, including the arrests of thousands of Nicaraguans in 1986. Many of those arrested were detained for relatively short periods of time, but they got the message. Roughly half of the detainees remained in special DGSE jails for longer periods—from several months to over a year. An entire village of 70 inhabitants, near the small town of El Chile in Military Region V, was arrested in the fall of 1986. The men were sent to El Modelo prison on the eastern outskirts of Managua, and the women were detained in the DGSE operations offices in Juigalpa, some 132 kilometers east of Managua. The charge was that the village had provided some cattle to Resistance forces in January 1986.

In terms of the conventional threat, i.e., groups that might interact with a U.S. intervention, the DGSE tracks and periodically harasses the internal opposition leadership of the Church, the private sector, independent labor unions, and political parties. Despite heroic efforts, these opposition groups are largely ineffective in opposing the Sandinista government. Suppression of all civil liberties in October 1985

gave the DGSE the necessary legal power to take any steps it deems necessary to protect the state; thus it closed the Catholic radio station and did not permit its head, Monsignor Carballo, to return to Nicaragua. In July 1986, it forcibly removed Bishop Vega from Nicaragua. The DGSE has lists of Nicaraguans who would be immediately killed as collaborators in the event of a U.S. invasion.

In a military and security sense, the Sandinistas have made significant progress. General Humberto Ortega, the Sandinista Defense Minister, paraphrasing Sun Tzu, the famous Chinese strategist of 500 B.C., observed that the greatest general is the one who wins without fighting. The Sandinistas' principal pillars of power—the EPS, the DSGE, and Soviet support—give them an excellent chance to do just that regarding the only threat the FSLN believes can destroy its revolution, a U.S. intervention.

#### **SANDINISTA NATIONAL STRATEGY: THE OTHER INSTALLMENTS OF POWER**

In the *political* area, the objective is consolidation.<sup>4</sup> According to ten basic criteria used to measure consolidation of communist regimes, the Sandinistas are 85 percent consolidated. What exists today in Nicaragua is essentially a one-party government with a seven-party National Assembly, two-thirds of which is controlled by the FSLN. The Assembly is a "window dressing" institution designed to give the image but not the reality of democracy. A small number of other opposition parties exist outside the National Assembly, but they are given very little political space in which to operate and they are periodically harassed.

From the very beginning, in July 1979, the Sandinistas took control of the military and security services. As yet, there are no Soviet or Cuban troops in Nicaragua, but there are 8,000 Cuban military and civilian advisers, and most of the civilians are well-trained reservists.

Economic control is almost complete, with only the Rice Growers' Association allowed any measure of independence. The state controls or supervises all other economic activity. The Sandinistas have penetrated or created parallel labor and mass organizations in classic Leninist fashion. There are still two or three independent labor unions, but they are also harassed and pressured. The latest means used to pressure independent labor leadership was reserve military service notification. A mid-level opposition party leader who was called

<sup>4</sup>Garrett Sweeney, "Consolidation of Communist Regimes," Unclassified Political Section Memorandum, U.S. Embassy, Managua, September 9, 1985, pp. 1-2.

for reserve service was killed in a training accident. This "lesson" has not been lost on independent labor leaders facing similar periods of reserve military training.

For all practical purposes, the June 26, 1986, closing of the newspaper *La Prensa* completed the government media monopoly. With the exception of closely monitored private Catholic schools, control of the school system is nearly complete. Social control via the DGSE, as discussed earlier, is complete, although physical torture and execution is the exception rather than the rule. Reports of killings by the DGSE and the EPS surface from time to time, however, and they increased in 1986 to the point where various human-rights organizations criticized the Sandinistas.<sup>5</sup>

Religious influence has been challenged through the development of a parallel "popular" church, which is not very popular if attendance is a criterion. Nevertheless, its Valdivieso Center serves as a sort of liberation theology "think tank," publishing papers and challenging Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo whenever possible. Church leaders, including Bishop Vega, have been kicked out of Nicaragua, and Monsignor Carballo has not been permitted to return to Nicaragua. Many foreign priests friendly to the traditional Church in Nicaragua have been unable to renew their visas or have been asked to leave. However, as of yet, there have been no major Church closings. The Church remains the most powerful element of the internal opposition, as shown by the crowd of 50,000 supporters who turned out to close the Eucharistic Conference held in November 1986 in Managua.

Finally, with respect to alignment with the Soviet bloc, there is still no formal security treaty, nor do Soviet forces use Sandinista military facilities. However, Sandinista leaders conduct high-level exchanges and meetings with communist-bloc leaders, and Nicaragua actively supports the Soviet Union in international forums. There are signs that the Soviets may want the Nicaraguans to adapt to the capitalist environment without becoming capitalists. This may presage a more nonaligned, less internationalist stance.<sup>6</sup>

Another element of the Sandinistas' strategy is the use of *diplomacy* to sustain worldwide sympathy for their cause. They make effective use of international organizations, particularly the United Nations, where they have obtained sufficient votes to condemn U.S. policy with respect to Nicaragua. However, the Sandinistas have had less luck in the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Nonaligned

<sup>5</sup>Laura Lopez, "Sidetracked Revolution," *Time Magazine*, March 31, 1986, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup>Georgie Anne Geyer, "New Deal in Nicaragua?" *The Harrisburg Patriot*, July 9, 1987, p. A-23.

Movement (NAM); in the latter organization, they failed to obtain the support necessary to host the NAM meeting in 1988.

The use of high-level travel is also a favorite Sandinista tactic, as exemplified by President Daniel Ortega's trip to the Soviet Union, Western Europe, and Eastern Europe in mid-1985.

The Sandinistas' approach to the regional peace effort embodied in the Contadora Group (Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, Panama) and the Support Group (Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Peru) has been to appear to be forthcoming on security issues while stonewalling any discussion of their internal political situation. The Sandinistas have preferred to divide and conquer through seeking bilateral agreements with neighboring countries and the United States, rather than seriously engaging in multilateral efforts such as Contadora.

President Ortega's signing, along with the El Salvadoran, Guatemalan, Honduran, and Costa Rican presidents, on August 7, 1987, of the Arias initiative calling for ceasefires, amnesty, and democratization is probably a tactical maneuver. It is most likely designed to appear forthcoming, while the regime counts on agreement ambiguities to forestall any meaningful concessions regarding Nicaragua's internal political situation.

International support for the Sandinistas has eroded over the past two years, as nations have observed the increasing repression within Nicaragua, and the Marxist-Leninist nature of the government has become increasingly clear. Nevertheless, there remains sufficient international support for the Sandinistas, including support in the United States, to give them just enough legitimacy and acceptance to make effective diplomatic isolation difficult to achieve. The Sandinistas use diplomacy well in their never-ending search for solidarity and greater legitimacy, whether it be with the U.S. public, the Latin American nations, or Europe. The socialist bloc, as is to be expected, can be counted on to support Nicaragua, but even this support has its limits, which may force the FSLN to use its resources more efficiently.<sup>7</sup> Finally the Sandinistas are aided in their diplomatic efforts to prevent decisive military action against them by the historical involvement of the United States in the region, by the fundamental Latin American belief in nonintervention and self-determination, and by the widely held view in the United States that Nicaragua is not a sufficient threat to warrant direct U.S. military action.

Another instrument skillfully used by the FSLN to further its survival strategy is *psychosocial* in nature. The almost total control of the

<sup>7</sup>Stephen Kinzer, "For Nicaragua Soviet Frugality Starts to Pinch," *New York Times*, August 20, 1987, pp. A-1, 12.

Nicaraguan media allows the Sandinistas to create their own reality by bombarding the populace with themes blaming Nicaragua's ills on U.S. "aggression" and depicting the Resistance as mercenary proxies of the United States. High-level travel to the United States by President Daniel Ortega in November 1985 and Vice President Sergio Ramirez in November 1986 played on the "David vs. Goliath" theme, as well as the Nicaraguan desire for peace and negotiations with the United States. This apparent "reasonableness" has had an impact on the psychosocial climate in the United States and complicates the Administration's ability to sustain support for the NDR. The December 1986 release of Eugene Hasenfus (the crew member and cargo handler on the C-123K rebel resupply plane shot down on October 5, 1986, by an EPS SA-7 missile) was also designed to affect U.S. public opinion toward the Sandinistas. The FSLN leaders follow very clearly shifts in U.S. opinion, especially the mood of the U.S. Congress, because they know that this is the institution whose decisions will most affect their future.

The Iran-Contra connection, in which money supposedly gained from selling arms to Iran may have been used to support the Resistance in Nicaragua during 1986, has also been used by the Sandinistas. They say it proves what they have been arguing all along: that the U.S. Administration continued to help the Resistance even during the time when this was prohibited by law. Again, the Sandinista goal is to make it difficult, if not impossible, to sustain support for the Resistance as a result of diminished Presidential credibility.

Another element of the psychosocial reality that aids the Sandinistas is the perception that they are firmly in control of the country. One elderly citizen from Jinotega told me, "We go with the one who is in charge—*con quien manda*." Sandinista military and security successes only reinforce the idea among the population that no matter what they really feel, there is no viable choice other than the FSLN.

Despite these strategies, public support for the FSLN has eroded. Still, DGSE efficiency combined with public fear and apathy will make it very difficult to galvanize the Nicaraguan population to act against the Sandinistas. The Nicaraguans will need to see a fuller communication of Resistance political doctrine, or they will continue to view the rebels as remnants of "the bad old past." Most important, they will need to see concrete and continuous Resistance military success before they commit themselves.

The *economic* element of power is helpful to the Sandinistas only in a negative sense. Regardless of war pressures and their own mismanagement of the economy, the Sandinistas rule a population that is accustomed to hardship. They are also blessed with a very rich agricultural country. Moreover, despite recent reductions in Soviet oil

support, the Sandinistas get enough economic help from the socialist bloc (\$425 million in 1987) to ensure survival, although, as mentioned before, they will have to start managing their resources more effectively.<sup>8</sup> Some West European and other countries are also providing the Nicaraguan government with diminishing amounts of additional assistance. The Sandinistas have managed to use U.S. economic sanctions as a propaganda weapon by exaggerating their impact and blaming management shortfalls on the United States.

The challenge is to increase efficiency and manage shortages through the rationing system, which actually adds to the Sandinistas' ability to control the population. The idea that the Sandinistas may run out of basic foodstuffs and not have anything to ration is not realistic, given continuing Soviet support and Nicaragua's inherent agricultural richness.

### CONCLUDING COMMENT

The Sandinistas have skillfully used their military, political, diplomatic, psychosocial, and economic instruments—even turning weakness to advantage when possible. They have managed to keep U.S. and NDR credibility low while further consolidating their revolution. So far, their strategy of defeating the intervention before it occurs has worked well.

The Sandinistas will indeed be a tough nut to crack, but there are signs that the pressure may be working, up to a point. The challenge now for U.S. policymakers is, as a Kenny Rogers song suggests, to "know when to hold 'em, and know when to fold 'em," when meshing diplomacy and force in pursuit of U.S. interests in regional peace, security, and stability. Edward Luttwak suggests in his recent book, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace*, that Clausewitz's dictum regarding the culmination of victory should be kept in mind.<sup>9</sup> The Sandinistas appear willing to make concessions. The United States should avoid "pursuing success without limit," i.e., perfect democracy in Nicaragua, while obtaining what it can in terms of political space for the civil opposition in Nicaragua. If we go too far and call for too much, we may end up with nothing, or worse, less than nothing, in terms of democracy and exacerbated Latin American estrangement.

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. A-12.

<sup>9</sup>Edward N. Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace*, Belknap Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1987.

## WHY NOT A DIPLOMATIC-POLITICAL OPTION IN NICARAGUA?<sup>1</sup>

Anthony P. Maingot

### INTRODUCTION

The Sandinista elite has been in power in Nicaragua since 1979. By 1981, major defections of non-Marxist members of that government were revealing what outsiders had long suspected: The Sandinista elite was determined to build a Leninist state in Nicaragua. The suspicion stemmed from the prominent roles Ché Guevara and Fidel Castro had played in the original guerrilla movement led by Carlos Fonseca in 1959–1960, and from the words of the movement's leaders. Humberto Ortega rejected the "bourgeois democratic way out"<sup>2</sup> in 1979, and soon thereafter Tomás Borge showed that he had read Lenin well when he rejected party politics, saying, "Our working class in general is not spontaneously revolutionary, neither here nor anywhere else. It must be led to its role of vanguard of the revolutionary process."<sup>3</sup>

By 1987, it appeared quite evident that while the project of the Sandinista elite is a Leninist one, the regime has had to make considerable concessions to the traditionally more conservative and less "revolutionary" society it governs. Clearly, an elite's determination to build a particular political system and its capacity and ability to do so are two different things. This is especially true in the case of Marxist-Leninist revolutions, which require major cultural changes.<sup>4</sup> It is not at all evident that the Sandinistas have managed to bring about this cultural change, a fact which might explain their attempts to make accommodations or concessions with pluralism—economic, social, and political.

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<sup>1</sup>A revised and updated version of this paper was published as "U.S. Strategy in Nicaragua," *Caribbean Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 1, January-March 1988, pp. 45–58. (*Caribbean Affairs* is published in Trinidad.)

<sup>2</sup>Humberto Ortega, "La estrategia de la victoria," *Bohemia* (Havana), December 1979, p. 2, cited in David Nolan, *FSLN: The Ideology of the Sandinistas and the Nicaraguan Revolution*, Institute of Inter-American Studies, Miami, Fla., 1984, p. 28.

<sup>3</sup>Tomás Borge, "La formación de FSLN," cited in Nolan, *FSLN*, p. 28.

<sup>4</sup>This point will not be pursued here, but it should be kept in mind as a critical issue in the debate. (See Alfred G. Meyer, "Cultural Revolutions: The Uses of the Concept of Culture in the Comparative Study of Communist Systems," *Studies in Comparative Communism*, Vol. XVI, Spring-Summer 1983, pp. 5–8.)

From any sociological perspective, therefore, there is an evident tension in contemporary Nicaragua between the elite's voluntarism (subjective factors) and objective, social structural factors. While Nicaraguan anti-Americanism and nationalism generally have served the Sandinistas well, the continued need to emphasize a "particularism" such as traditional nationalism necessarily dampens the elite's Marxist-Leninist internationalist fervor. The very use of General C. A. Sandino as the model for the present revolution forces the regime to both reinterpret Sandino's thought and modify its own Marxist rhetoric.<sup>5</sup> Despite the Leninist-style political power the Sandinistas exercise in the country, it is not at all clear that they have attempted to implement their "maximalist" political agenda. Compromises and accommodation appear to be very much a part of their *modus operandi*. This hesitation has affected the level of support the regime has received from Moscow. According to one authority on Soviet Third World policy, the failure of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) to fully form itself into a Soviet-style vanguard party "has led to a lower ranking for Nicaragua in Soviet priorities among Third World clients."<sup>6</sup>

It is, of course, a truism that in the final analysis Nicaraguans should have the freedom to solve their own problems. The Sandinista elite purposely and voluntarily introduced the country into the cold war (thereby bringing about a predictable U.S. response), voluntarily introduced the single-party structure (thereby bringing about a predictable external response), and voluntarily created a military structure several times that of any neighboring country (thereby triggering the fears and apprehensions of those countries).<sup>7</sup> We do not propose to analyze or

<sup>5</sup>For an interesting case of this intellectual game of words, see Donald C. Hodges, *Intellectual Foundations of the Nicaraguan Revolution*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1986. Having decided that Sandino was really an "anarchistic version of Communism," Hodges concludes that "Sandino's Communism dressed up in Marxist-Leninist phraseology and a theology of liberation has a magnificent opportunity to replace the worn-out and exhausted liberalism of the Nicaraguan opposition" (p. 295).

<sup>6</sup>Francis Fukuyama, "Soviet Experience with Cooperative Forces," in Charles Wolf, Jr., and Katherine Watkins Webb (eds.), *Developing Cooperative Forces in the Third World*, Lexington Books, Lexington, Mass., 1987, p. 86. The Sandinista compromises are discussed by Heinrich W. Krumwiede, "Sandinista Democracy: Problems of Institutionalization," in Wolf Grabendorff et al. (eds.), *Political Change in Central America: Internal and External Dimensions*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colo., 1984, pp. 64-81; Richard L. Harris, "Epilogue," in Richard Harris and Carlos M. Vilas (eds.), *Nicaragua: A Revolution Under Siege*, Zed Books, London, 1986, pp. 235-249.

<sup>7</sup>All points made by *The Report of the President's National Bipartisan Commission on Central America* (1984), better known as the Kissinger Commission. Shirley Christian believes that the Sandinistas fully intended to establish a Leninist system from the very start: "This tends to negate the arguments that antagonism from the United States nudged Nicaragua along a totalitarian path." (Shirley Christian, *Nicaragua: Revolution in the Family*, Random House, New York, 1985, p. 306.)

explain any of these Sandinista actions here. We accept these facts as givens. The question here is how the United States and its allies should deal with the Sandinistas. Within this context of the need for hardline Leninist elites to be pragmatic, this paper asks two questions about the Reagan Administration's policy toward the Sandinistas:

1. What has been the nature of the military strategy chosen and what are its prospects?
2. Are there other options open to the United States and its allies?

We begin by attempting to understand the nature of the war.

### THE NATURE OF THE WAR

Nicaragua has historically demonstrated that predicting any people's "threshold of sacrifice" is difficult, and underestimating it is dangerous. The history of the Nicaraguan society—even before Sandino decided to fight the U.S. Marines—tells us that Nicaraguans of all persuasions are capable of sustaining enormous losses for long periods without "crying uncle." For example, the anti-Somoza struggle, in which an FSLN of 5,000 men at its strongest was pitted against 12,000 lightly armed Guardias, cost the following:<sup>8</sup>

|   |                |
|---|----------------|
| Killed  | 30,000-50,000* |
| Injured   | 100,000        |
| Left homeless   | 150,000        |
| Fled country  | 150,000        |
| Industrial base destroyed   | 23% of value   |
| Loss to commercial establishments   | 34% of value   |
| Total material costs<br>(physical damage,<br>capital flight, loss of<br>production) | \$15 billion   |

\*80 to 90 percent civilians.

It is a rule of thumb that the fighting spirit of a guerrilla army will be equivalent to the fighting spirit of the regular army if the fighters

<sup>8</sup>James D. Rudolph (ed.), *Nicaragua, A Country Study*, Department of the Army, Washington, D.C., 1982, p. 58. These figures conform with data from both Organization of American States (OAS) and United Nations sources.

are recruited from the same societal pool. In Nicaragua, this does not hold fully, since the Contras are much more of a peasant army than the regular *Ejercito Popular Sandinista* (EPS). Much of the combat, however, has been between peasant Contras and the peasant militias of the "cooperatives," which are really strategic hamlets; this in itself should tell us that this is going to be a long, bitter war. In any such war, the critical issue becomes that of human will, especially of the elites. While it is clear that the "die is cast" for the short term in Nicaragua—i.e., there will be increasing combat—it is evident that even as this issue is being analyzed in mid-1987, major events might bring about significant changes in (1) the effectiveness of the new Contra political leadership and (2) the nature of future U.S. financial support.

Some Contra leaders tend to underrate the "holding" power of the Sandinistas. Adolfo Calero, for instance, is fond of calling the Sandinistas *comunistas tropicales*, which, interestingly enough, is what the Cuban exiles used to call Castro in the early 1960s. The same predictions of disarray followed by Soviet anger and abandonment that were put forth by Cuban exiles at that time are evident today among Nicaraguan exiles. But nothing in either Marxist-Leninist practice or Nicaraguan history warrants such a conclusion. On the other hand, the Sandinista tendency to describe the Contras as Guardias and mercenaries also appears to be off the mark. The Contras have shown that they can survive despite the heavy casualties they seem to be suffering, and that with or without U.S. or Soviet assistance, the battle will be fought.

The Contra guerrilla movement began in 1980 when Colonel Bermudez and some 50 members of the defeated Guardia Nacional began operations out of Honduras. The Contras had grown to between 12,000 and 18,000 men by late 1986, some 80 percent of them being *campesinos* recently recruited and divided into three war zones. Half of the officers served in the Guardia, one-third are ex-Sandinista officers, and the rest are new. They are all volunteers.

The EPS was established in 1980 and has continued to grow every year. It was estimated to have about 65,000 men by 1985, plus tens of thousands of armed militias. The Ministry of the Interior has its own units of counterinsurgency forces. Figure 1 shows the major distribution of these forces in 1985. To understand the nature of the present war, one has to know something about the casualties, the number of military engagements, and the geographical distribution of these engagements. A comparison of El Salvador and Nicaragua in 1986 and over a longer period reveals some important similarities.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup>The data on which this discussion is based come from the following sources: *Los Angeles Times*, January 4, 1986, p. 5; *Los Angeles Times*, January 1, 1987, p. 16; *New York Times*, January 1, 1986, p. 4; *New York Times*, January 4, 1986, p. 4; *New York*



Fig. 1—Major distribution of EPS forces in 1985

In El Salvador, the rebel Faribundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) claims that it killed and wounded 6,151 soldiers in 1986. The Roman Catholic Church claims that 1,725 people were killed, 421 of whom were soldiers. Both sides agree, however, that between 1979 and 1986, 62,000 people were killed. That is 8,857 deaths per year in a population of 5 million. Combat—some 2,500 “actions,” according to

*Times*, July 8, 1987, p. 4; *Granma* (Havana), June 7, 1987, p. 12. Two doctors who returned from Nicaragua in July 1987 stated that the Sandinista government figures include 40,000 dead, 11,000 wounded, and 300,000 “displaced persons” (*Los Angeles Times*, July 12, 1987, p. 2).

the FMLN—took place in about one-half the national territory of 8,260 square miles. In Nicaragua, which has a population of 3 million living on 50,180 square miles, the rebel *Frente Democrático Nacional* (FDN) claims to have caused 5,406 Sandinista casualties in 1986. The government admits to 2,807, and it claims 6,600 killed and wounded Contras and 1,500 defectors. The Sandinistas say there were some 3,000 encounters in 1986; the Contras claim there were 866. Everything seems to indicate that fighting is taking place on about one-third of the national territory.

President Ortega's admission that 30,000—or 6,000 per year—have died between 1981 and 1986 is not disputed by anyone. In terms of the annual ratio of killed-to-population, there is not much difference between the 1:80 ratio in El Salvador and the 1:100 ratio in Nicaragua. It is evident, therefore, that these two societies, with a total population of 8 million, have suffered 92,000 war-caused deaths since 1979, while the United States, with a population at the time of some 200 million, suffered 33,629 battlefield deaths in Korea and 47,253 in Vietnam, a 1:4,233 ratio in the latter conflict. If we accept the definition of low-intensity conflict (LIC) adopted by the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, i.e., "a limited politico-military struggle . . . generally confined to a geographic area and . . . often characterized by constraints on the weaponry, tactics and the level of violence," this is not what is taking place in Nicaragua.<sup>10</sup> This is a full-fledged civil war.

We put forth the following hypothesis, on the assumption that in civil wars, strategy has to include both military and political dimensions: The demographic, economic, and military situation (as of mid-1987) indicates that Nicaragua is faced with a medium- to long-term stalemate, with increasing casualties on both sides. The demographic, economic, and military dimensions are discussed separately below, but it should be understood, of course, that they do not operate independently or discretely in reality.

### Demographics

Nicaragua, with an area of 140,621 square miles (the size of Michigan), is divided into three distinct "regions": the Pacific region, the central highlands, and the Atlantic region. These regions have influenced the course of all the country's civil wars and are doing so again today.

<sup>10</sup>See Lieutenant Colonel Peter A. Bond, "In Search of LIC," *Military Review*, August 1986, p. 80.

The Pacific region contains 62 percent of the 3 million population, ethnically largely mestizo-Spanish called *criollos*, divided as follows: 60 percent (700,000 people) are in Managua; 7 percent (90,000 people) are in León; and the other 33 percent are divided among 8 cities with populations of 20,000 to 50,000 and 10 cities with populations of 10,000 to 20,000. Many of these cities are in the second region,

The central highlands, which rise to 6,000 feet elevation, contain 27 percent of the total population, settled almost exclusively on the Western slopes. The Eastern slopes are characterized by shallow bays, lagoons, and marshes which blend into the third region, the Atlantic.

The Atlantic region covers 70,000 square kilometers, 56 percent of the national territory (45 percent of it is in one department, Zelaya), but it has only 200,000 people, 10 percent of the population. The largest towns in this region are Bluefields, which has 25,000 people, mostly English-speaking, of African/West Indian origin, and Puerto Cabezas, which has a population of 12,000, mostly Miskito Indians.

The fundamental division, thus, is between the Pacific and Atlantic regions and is based on ethnicity (race, religion, language), economics, and historical-administrative isolation. The central highlands can represent either a bridge or a barrier between them, and it is in the northern part of these highlands that most of Nicaragua's wars have begun: from Sandino in the 1920s to the Sandinistas in the 1970s to the Contras today. The rebels recruit peasants from the central highlands and launch attacks against the nation's infrastructure. Honduras, across the border, provides easy access and thus sanctuary.

### Economics

From an economic point of view, things have been deteriorating in both the urban and rural areas of Nicaragua. The inflation rate in the country was 334 percent in 1985 and 656 percent in 1986. The standard of living has dropped to post-World War II levels. The speed of the deterioration is evident in the fact that in 1980 the U.S. dollar was worth 7 cordobas on the black market; in late 1986, it was worth between 3,000 and 3,200 cordobas. There has been no overall increase in wages, so the people have absorbed the losses. Again, as Forrest Colburn argues, the Sandinistas are faced with the clash between their "revolutionary ideology and rhetoric" and the need to satisfy quite different and often contradictory sectoral demands. This, along with poor management, accounts for the economic slide.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Forrest Colburn, *Post Revolutionary Nicaragua: State, Class, and the Dilemmas of Agrarian Policy*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1986. Since 1986, one would have to include direct Contra military action against the economy as a major factor in the decline.

In general, Sandinista economic performance has been very poor. It is not clear, however, whether this is a significant factor that can be taken advantage of militarily, particularly in view of the following:

1. The U.S. embargo is hurting, but the nature of the Nicaraguan economy was such that a shift toward new markets for vital (not consumer) items was quite feasible.
2. The people can be forced to accept lower standards of living, especially when the discontent have easy exit.

Migration is an increasingly important "escape valve"—some 10 percent of the population has used it since 1980.

The population, of course, has many other complaints as well. Some Catholics feel discriminated against, and the "traditionalists" have responded, filling the churches; the so-called "popular" church appears to be more and more a branch of the regime. Again, it is difficult to see how this has been translated into a military advantage for the Resistance. Nor do known comparative cases of Roman Catholic societies, such as Poland and Cuba, provide encouragement. The machinery of the Leninist state appears to be more than a match for whatever mobilizing potential religion holds out.

Are there other ways in which these demographic and socioeconomic conditions have reverted or can revert to the military benefit of the Contras? The isolation of certain areas in the absence of a Sandinista air force is certainly an advantage. There are two geographical areas which have to varying degrees and at different times shown a strong anti-Sandinista orientation: (1) several agricultural and cattle-raising areas in the central highlands departments of Nueva Segovia, Esteli, Jinotega, Matagalpa, Boaco, Chontales, and Rio San Juan, and (2) the Atlantic coast and Rio Coco areas. In Chontales especially, a column named after a popular rancher, Jorge Salazar, who was killed by security forces in 1980, has operated independently and with some effect. The *costeños*, as Atlantic coast people are called, although neither numerous nor renowned for their martial spirit, and those of the Rio Coco area are also generally opposed to the regime and will probably assist the Contras. The level of fighting since late 1986 seems to indicate that substantial numbers of Contras are indeed operating in about 50 percent of the national territory.

### **The Military Dimension**

Two direct military benefits accrue from operations in this region:  
(1) The Sandinista forces are drawn out over large areas, putting major

strains in costs and losses on their air, land, and river logistical and supply capabilities; and (2) the regime is forced into the unpopular strategy of "strategic hamlets," which deprives the guerrillas of immediate popular support but tends to reduce government popularity.

Again, all of these conditions assure a stalemate. Critical is the fact that the Contras have not captured a single major or even minor urban area. The vital Pacific demographic strip appears solidly under Sandinista control. In his paper in this report, Colonel Alden Cunningham provides a detailed description of the Sandinista "two-war" defense strategy and how effective it has been in keeping the Contras out of the populated areas. Suffice it to say here that the Sandinistas suffer no shortages of materiel. Defense expenditures are now 50 percent of the national budget; the annual per capita expenditure has gone from \$16 under Somoza to \$72 under Ortega. The Sandinistas appear to have solved (for the short term) the problem of resistance to recruitment, and the frequently repeated Contra themes that this army of conscripts will eventually prove undependable and ineffective have not proven to be accurate.<sup>12</sup> In fact, if the bulk of the Sandinista forces hold, the military advantages claimed for the Resistance can well be seen as being long-term government strengths, for the following reasons:

1. The further the Contras spread out from their Honduran bases, the more difficult problems of resupply, communication, and coordinated command become. The operational units have to be kept small and on the move. The history of the Castroite guerrillas in Latin America is replete with lessons about the futility of purely rural guerrillas. The position of the Sandinistas until the final offensive of 1979 was similar to the current Contra position and was changed by alterations in urban attitudes.
2. Even in those areas claimed to be controlled by the Contras, Sandinista military mobility and effectiveness have proven to be excellent. "Comandante Oscar" of the UNO-Frente Sur, in an interview published in *Nicaragua Hoy*, describes the shooting down and capturing of the Hasenfus plane in territory

<sup>12</sup>The theme that discontent will make an army of conscripts quite undependable is repeated constantly by UNO-FDN (*Unidad Nicaraguense Opositora-Frente Democrático Nacional*) leaders. As soon as Contra military activity escalates, massive defections can be expected. Commander Enrique Bermudez, who tells the press that he sets strategy, has made this a major part of his plans. (See interviews with Bermudez in *Nicaragua Hoy*, November 22, 1986, and *Los Angeles Times*, December 15, 1986. For an opposite view, see Richard Boudreaux, "Nicaragua Tames Draft Resistance," *Los Angeles Times*, May 13, 1986, pp. 1, 4.)

believed to be rebel-controlled.<sup>13</sup> By the time his column of 200 men arrived at the site of the crash, there were some 1,000 Sandinista soldiers in the area. Obviously, the rebels did not engage them.

Aside from these logistical and numerical problems, the Contras appear to have two additional weaknesses which have contributed to the advantage of the Sandinistas: There appears thus far to be no agreement on overall strategy—indeed there is not even much debate on it<sup>14</sup>—and there has been great instability in the movement's political and military command structure. Both weaknesses are reflected in the little public discussion that has taken place on strategy and tactics; there is a strange faith that events will turn the Contras' way not by any action of their own but rather through Sandinista failings. In part, this responds to the fact that none of the leaders of the UNO are military men; even Comandante Bermudez was more of a military "diplomat" than a proven field commander.<sup>15</sup> And there is doubt as to whether even Bermudez is in charge of the military strategy. Adolfo Calero continuously describes himself as "the principal authority" in both civilian and military matters.<sup>16</sup> The way in which the present attempts to restructure the Contra leadership work out will not have a short-term effect on the war. Again, there does not appear to be any evident strategy that can take advantage of the "cracks" in the Leninist structure. This is not new with Nicaragua; the whole history of Western dealings with such states is one of frustration in the face of quite palpable weaknesses which "rationally" should be exploitable.

Contra Commander-in-Chief Bermudez admits that the Contras have little in the way of secret organizations in either cities or rural areas because of "the controls that exist."<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, he does not seem to think that political-ideological work is critical, because victory will come from a Sandinista collapse. One of the most

<sup>13</sup>*Nicaragua Hoy*, December 6, 1986, p. 2.

<sup>14</sup>A review of two years of two major Contra newspapers (*Nicaragua Hoy* and *Foro Centroamericano*) indicates none of the debates among Marxists about the various strategies of guerrilla warfare.

<sup>15</sup>Christopher Dickey, *With the Contras*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1986, pp. 85-86.

<sup>16</sup>*Nicaragua Hoy*, October 25, 1986. This brief review does not repeat many of the rumors that abound in the area about the Contras, especially regarding trading in drugs. A detailed article by William R. Long does reveal the opinions of four comandantes who recently abandoned Contra ranks, accusing Bermudez of (1) having no military skills, (2) corruption, (3) favoritism toward a clique of high-paid officials who live in Miami, and (4) doing little about the Sandinista infiltration of Contra ranks (*Los Angeles Times*, December 15, 1986).

<sup>17</sup>*Los Angeles Times*, December 15, 1986.

frequently mentioned strategies for the achievement of this collapse is that of "liberated territory." On May 2, 1986, Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North informed Vice Admiral John Poindexter that he believed the Contras were preparing to capture a "principal coastal population center" and proclaim independence. He suggested that the United States should go to their aid. Assistant Secretary of State Elliot Abrams believed it was North's idea and said he gave his support but never took the idea seriously: "It was totally implausible and not doable."<sup>18</sup> The November 1986 convention of the newly formed UNO was full of discussions about such a liberated territory, made possible by the \$100 million that had recently been released by the U.S. Congress.<sup>19</sup> It is believed that the "liberation" of a part of Nicaragua will (1) allow the diplomatic recognition of the UNO-FDN and the simultaneous isolation of the Sandinistas and (2) provide a rallying point for dissidents and deserters.

Let us assume—and the developing civil war makes such an assumption plausible—that the Resistance does "liberate" a major piece of territory and holds it. If the "liberated territory" strategy has a largely political-diplomatic goal, it must be acknowledged that such a strategy has at least three serious forces operating against it:

1. Recent speeches by Presidents Alfonsín of Argentina and García of Peru indicate that securing international approval might not be easy. García received a standing ovation from the Argentine Congress when he declared that no recognition would be given to a territory liberated by the United States.<sup>20</sup>
2. The mood even among strong anti-communists in Central America is one of such skepticism on all grounds that no immediate recognition (and thus benefit) can be expected. Costa Rica's Minister of Foreign Affairs notes that the fear of being abandoned by the United States (as happened in the

<sup>18</sup>The Tower Commission Report, New York Times Books, New York, 1987, p. 466.

<sup>19</sup>Nicaragua Hoy, November 29, 1986. Timothy Ashby, "The Road to Managua: How the Contras Can Win," *Policy Review*, No. 39, Winter 1987, pp. 10-16, makes a strong case for a "liberated territory of Miskitía."

<sup>20</sup>Because Allan García's Peru is a member of the Contadora Support Group and because he represents a new "democratic left" leadership, his views are important. The only Latin American head of state to go to Nicaragua for the unveiling of the new constitution, García insisted on the democratic nature of Nicaragua: "This constitution tells us democrats of the world that there is no revolution without freedom, without participation and without conscience" (*Barricada Internacional*, January 15, 1987, p. 4). In Caracas, García later explained that he accepted an invitation to go to Nicaragua to defend the principles of "no intervention, pluralism and democracy" (*Uno mas uno*, February 1, 1987).

Bay of Pigs in Cuba) is the "ghost running around Central America."<sup>21</sup>

3. Even if the "liberated territory" held so that some governments recognized it, who would compose the government? Much earlier, Arturo Cruz had been quoted by journalist Shirley Christian as saying that he had learned the bitter lesson that "broad alliances do not function."<sup>22</sup> Even after Cruz's resignation from the U.S.-conceived coalition, the dissension within the UNO-FDN continues and is great. The question most observers ask is, If they cannot get together while in opposition and under tremendous U.S. pressure (and material incentives), what makes you believe they will do so when they are closer to power?

This discussion on the nature of the war appears to support the hypothesis that trends are pointing toward an intensified civil war characterized by a prolonged and bloody stalemate. In confirming this hypothesis, we have also answered the question of what role the actions of the Reagan Administration have played in the various developments of the war. We find that the United States has made the level of resistance possible through financial support, but that very support has had the negative effect of creating excessive dependency.

This dependency affects the image of the Contras at home and abroad, but it goes much further than that. President Duarte has indicated that "you cannot impose [a liberation movement] from the outside unless you invade."<sup>23</sup> Even the most fervent Resistance leaders reflect if not a direct hope for a U.S. invasion, at least a high dependence on continuing U.S. aid. In Nicaragua, civilian leaders have expressed this dependence in the following terms:<sup>24</sup> Enrique Bolaños (President, Nicaraguan Private Sector Organization) said, "The Contras cannot win by themselves. . . . The Central Americans see no will in the United States. . . . You pull the rug out from under your friends." And an anonymous Nicaraguan leader asked, "How do you want us to push for change when the U.S. Administration isn't going to push?"

Outside Nicaragua, the Contra leadership has admitted what observers suspect: They will depend on outside help because of the

<sup>21</sup>See the largely despondent opinions of Central American elites recorded by Rally Weymouth in the *Los Angeles Times*, October 12, 1986, pp. 1, 4.

<sup>22</sup>Christian, *Nicaragua: Revolution in the Family*, p. 278.

<sup>23</sup>*Los Angeles Times*, October 12, 1986, p. 4.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.* Note also the views of a Honduran official: "Only two options for Central Americans: (1) a U.S. invasion, and (2) neutrality vis-à-vis the Sandinistas."

tight control the Sandinistas exercise over the population (the Cuban strategy of an "armed people"). According to Colonel Bermudez, the military commander of the Contras, "The war is extinguished when it lacks resources. Guerrilla warfare against a totalitarian government has to depend in large part on outside aid."<sup>25</sup> Even those who have a more optimistic view of probable future support, such as Donald Castillo-Rivas, editor of the BOS newspaper, show the dependence: "The vast majority of the young," says Castillo-Rivas, "are neither Sandinista nor Contras; they are in a no-man's land, the conquest of which makes external assistance crucial."<sup>26</sup>

There are, of course, some who claim that a military victory is possible, but they are very few.<sup>27</sup> In the opinion of James Le Moyne, a well-informed journalist covering the war, "Almost no informed analyst gives the rebels much chance of success" at this point. Le Moyne adds, however, that "the Contras appear to have more support in the Nicaraguan countryside than their detractors have conceded."<sup>28</sup> But this is a strategy of containment, not victory, and it tends to be defended on the basis that support of the Contras is "cheaper" than most other military strategies.<sup>29</sup>

Even those, like General Paul F. Gorman, who have become more optimistic about the Contras' military chances, tend to hedge.<sup>30</sup> The critical point is that this hedging appears to characterize the internal, urban opponents of the regime, and it is in these urban areas that civil wars are won. Certainly that is where the 1979 final push against Somoza was won. The Contras control no urban centers, have been able to hold no major areas, and continue to depend on supplies from outside. The Contra army is still a peasant army fighting against motivated militias or well-equipped, educated, urban conscripts who seem driven by nationalism and anti-Americanism.

<sup>25</sup>Quoted in the *Los Angeles Times*, December 15, 1986, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup>*Foro Centroamericano*, August-September 1986.

<sup>27</sup>The most articulate statement of this argument is that of Penn Kemble and Arturo Cruz, Jr., "How the Nicaraguan Resistance Can Win," *Commentary*, December 1986, pp. 19-29.

<sup>28</sup>James Le Moyne, "U.S. in a Review, Found Outlook Poor for Contras," *New York Times*, December 15, 1986.

<sup>29</sup>Interview with General John R. Galvin, Commander U.S.-Southern Command, *Los Angeles Times*, May 20, 1987, p. 6.

<sup>30</sup>General Gorman, in a talk given at the National Defense University, was very negative about the Contras' chances (also reported in *Air Force Times*, February 9, 1987, p. 36). Later, he testified more optimistically, but he still concluded that "it is much too early to form judgement (sic) concerning their prospects." (Testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Congress of the United States, Washington, D.C., February 23, 1987.)

Stalemates are very hard to break in civil wars, and the war in Central America is no exception. Blind hatred and fanaticism for the cause have strengthened attitudes that these populations already had in abundance, characterized by an extraordinary capacity to endure pain and deprivation.

The second question above seems in order: What initiatives, other than a military victory of one side over the other, appear to have a reasonable chance of breaking the stalemate and moving the parties toward a settlement?

### THE CASE FOR A DIPLOMATIC-POLITICAL INITIATIVE

The military stalemate means that the time to begin negotiations for peace is not only overdue, conditions probably will not get very much more favorable than they were in mid-1987. Yet outside powers—the United States and Cuba especially—play crucial roles in any decision to negotiate an end to this war. This in many ways is inevitable; given the passions involved in civil wars, third parties will be needed to begin a peace process. It is also unfortunate.

It is hard to find, for instance, either moral or military-strategic merits in the Reagan Administration's refusal to support the various peace initiatives the Latin Americans have put forward. It is not moral, because while the U.S. position appears to be decisive, the United States is not a formal party to the negotiations, nor is it physically engaged in the war. Since decisions on whether or not to negotiate are largely based on an accounting of the costs in blood and capital of not negotiating, it is intrinsically amoral to have a party that is incurring minimal costs be the decisive player. That amorality becomes intolerable when the decision not to negotiate is not supported by credible arguments that a military victory is plausible. No such arguments have been forthcoming.

Throughout the critical period of the Contadora process, January 1983 to September 1985, the United States kept an inflexible position of not supporting any Central American treaty. Throughout this period also, the U.S. goals in Central America shifted from interdicting weapons to El Salvador to pressuring the Sandinistas to negotiate with the Contras toward the goal of outright overthrow of the Sandinista regime.<sup>31</sup> At first, as present evidence indicates, the policy was covert, but it soon became a matter of public discussion. When President Reagan announced on February 21, 1985, that the U.S. goal was to

<sup>31</sup>William Leo Grande, "Rollback or Containment? The U.S., Nicaragua, and the Search for Peace in Central America," *International Security*, Fall 1986.

remove the Sandinistas, that they would not be acceptable until "they say 'uncle,'" <sup>32</sup> a particular tone and style was given to a policy that was already understood implicitly. When Contadora appeared exhausted and perhaps defeated, the Central American presidents accepted the lead of President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica, who proposed a new peace initiative. <sup>33</sup> Although different in critical areas from Contadora, the Arias Plan was equally coolly received by Washington. <sup>34</sup> The logical question is, Why, if there was no evidence of military success, was such an overt hard political line being taken? Why was diplomacy, and specifically Contadora and then the Arias Plan, being shunned?

The standard answer is a military one. In the case of Contadora, it was argued that the process would be more harmful to the United States and its allies than to Nicaragua because it would:

1. Force the removal of U.S. military advisers from all of Central America.
2. Force the dismantling of all electronic intelligence installations.
3. Stop military maneuvers in Honduras.
4. Stop the modernization of the air forces of El Salvador and Honduras.
5. Eliminate the Contra bases in Honduras and Costa Rica.

The purely military argument does not appear adequate; the prohibitions cut both ways, <sup>35</sup> but especially into the Nicaraguan arsenal, since

<sup>32</sup>*New York Times*, February 26, 1985, p. 1.

<sup>33</sup>The proposal was not signed, but the presidents of Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador did sign on February 15, 1987, a call for peace and an invitation to Nicaragua to come to Esquipulas, Guatemala, 90 days from that date to discuss the following ten points of the Arias Plan:

1. National reconciliation; [a] amnesty, [b] dialogue
2. Ceasefire
3. Democratization
4. Free elections
5. Suspension of military assistance
6. Prohibition of use of national territory for foreign aggression
7. Reduction in armaments
8. National and international supervision
9. Evaluation of the progress toward peace
10. Democracy and freedom for peace and development

<sup>34</sup>The Reagan Administration's stance toward the Arias Plan has been culled from the *New York Times*, March 17, 1987, p. 2, April 26, 1987, p. 8, June 18, 1987, p. 3, and editorial, June 22, 1987, p. 10; the *Los Angeles Times*, June 19, 1987, p. 9; and the *Christian Science Monitor*, June 24, 1987, p. 1 and editorial.

<sup>35</sup>Some U.S. officials seemed to understand that: Joanne Omang of the *Washington Post* (May 11, 1986) quoted a State Department staff official as saying: "The Sandinistas should want good verification to make sure the Contras don't get any U.S. help, and

Contadora repeatedly called for a mutual scaling down so as to reach a military parity conducive to "stability and security in the region." The accompanying argument that communist regimes cannot be trusted to keep treaties and that there was no way to verify and curtail these violations<sup>36</sup> might be seen as betraying a dangerous level of self-righteous naiveté but was more probably just reinforcement for a military policy already chosen and launched.<sup>37</sup> There can be little doubt, however, that the American distrust of the Nicaraguan Sandinistas is shared by the other Central American states. This explains the detailed spelling out in the Arias Plan of on-the-spot national and international supervision of the arms-reduction process.

Even these details did not persuade the United States to support the initiative. This has become a missed political opportunity and consequently a diplomatic loss in the broader struggle to contain Leninism. The fact is that the United States was consistently outmaneuvered politically and diplomatically by the Sandinista elite, which skillfully coordinated its diplomacy to fit clear state, political, and military initiatives. The Sandinista strategy was facilitated by the virtual ignoring of Contadora and the Arias Plan by the United States, which ceded by default a major part of the game to the Sandinistas. Even if the U.S. policies had been showing military successes, diplomacy should have accompanied each step. In the face of no military success, the lack of diplomatic initiatives was a grave weakness.<sup>38</sup>

The first step in addressing this issue, then, is to understand the nature of the Sandinista diplomacy, to recognize the Sandinistas as a "worthy opponent," the significant other in the battle.

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we want it to make sure they [the Sandinistas] open up internally and stop sending arms" to rebels in El Salvador.

<sup>36</sup>"Prospects for Containment of Nicaragua's Communist Government," U.S. Department of Defense, Washington, D.C., May 1986.

<sup>37</sup>Such a conclusion finds some support in theories of decisionmaking processes. What might have been operating is what Jervis calls the "psychology of insufficient rewards": Rather than changing course when both incentives and cognitions show a course of action to be wrong, more rationalizations and attitudinal changes are made to fit the ongoing behavior. (Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1976.)

<sup>38</sup>Meant in the same vein as the "Western weaknesses" in negotiating that Fred Charles Iklé discusses in *How Nations Negotiate*, Harper and Row, New York, 1964. The following "weakness," for example, relates directly to our analysis: "The tendency to let the opponent determine the issue shows itself not only in the selection of subjects for negotiation but also in the terminology adopted and the concepts used." The latter, says Iklé, is especially damaging because "it can affect the thinking of negotiators without their being aware of it" (p. 240).

### THE GOALS OF SANDINISTA FOREIGN POLICY

It should be evident from the failure of the Contras to create the conditions that would induce the Sandinistas to budge under the rhetorical barrage from Washington that U.S. diplomacy was not only innocuous, it was downright counterproductive to the wider diplomatic game. By mid-1987, the Sandinistas had already shown that they were skilled diplomatic players. They had succeeded in maintaining virtually intact the three goals of their foreign policy (the main goal of which is, of course, consolidating their national power):<sup>39</sup>

1. Neutralizing U.S. support for the Contras by (a) insisting on direct, bilateral negotiations with the United States, and (b) forcing a Congressional cutoff of funding to the Contras.
2. Projecting an image of moderation to important sources of aid (such as the European Community countries)—internally by promulgating a constitution guaranteeing play of political parties and elections, and externally by seeking bilateral treaties with Honduras and Costa Rica (though not with El Salvador).
3. Delaying signing any agreements (e.g., the Contadora document or the Arias Plan) that would tie the regime's hands at home and curtail its unilateral international actions through multilateral and collective agreements.

Central to achieving all three goals was the capture, if not outright monopolization, of the language of peace and defense of international law, especially as regards self-determination and nonintervention. Such U.S. military moves as the mining of Nicaraguan harbors played right into Sandinista hands and forced the United States into further diplomatic isolation as the International Court of Justice found for the Nicaraguan side.

Moreover, while Nicaragua had appeared willing to sign the Contadora document in the early stages of its existence, that stance changed dramatically with the "revised version" of September 1984. The stance became a firm "No" when the 1984 draft reappeared, again revised, a year later, on September 12, 1985. Note the following sequence of Sandinista diplomacy:

1. On June 18-19, 1985, when the Central American and Contadora leaders met in Panama, Nicaragua immediately objected

<sup>39</sup>These three points were outlined in an official publication of the FSLN's Departamento de Propaganda y Educacion Politica, *Nicaragua: Bandera de la Paz*, Managua, 1982; see also *Barricada*, January 29, 1987, editorial, and *Barricada*, February 26, 1987, p. 3.

to the carefully crafted agenda, requesting instead a discussion of U.S. support for the Contras. Costa Rica's Deputy Foreign Minister, Jorge Urbina, called the Nicaraguan strategy "a theatrical stunt," saying that Nicaragua refused to discuss the Contadora document because "Nicaragua does not want there to be any progress [on that document]." <sup>40</sup>

2. The September 1985 Contadora draft was rejected in two stages: On October 6, Vice Minister Tinoco called for the Contadora group to ask the United States to declare a truce in its warlike policy toward Nicaragua in order to "create conditions to sign a peace agreement in the area." <sup>41</sup> Then on November 11, President Ortega rejected the Contadora peace plan, citing the failure to stop U.S. military maneuvers. He indicated that the treaty should include "a new protocol directed solely at the government of the United States" requiring it to "cease its aggressions in all forms against Nicaragua." <sup>42</sup>
3. On December, 1985, a Costa Rican suggestion that the signing of the Contadora document be postponed until after May 1986, given the forthcoming elections in Honduras, Guatemala, and Costa Rica, was immediately seized by Nicaragua, which asked for a six-month suspension of negotiations, during which U.S. aggression was to be stopped. <sup>43</sup>

The point was, of course, that something was happening to force this Sandinista change. Because the United States was not in a mood to explore what this new development might be, it not only lost a diplomatic opportunity, it actually gave the Sandinistas some extra points. Official U.S. statements during this critical period illustrate the U.S. policy direction and diplomatic style:

1. On June 4, 1985, the United States cited a number of situations that would force U.S. military action against Nicaragua. <sup>44</sup>
2. On July 18, 1985, it was revealed that the U.S. Southern Command planned to keep a 1,200-man military "task force" on duty in Palmerola, Honduras, "for the next three to five years." <sup>45</sup>

<sup>40</sup>FBIS-LA, June 20, 1985.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., October 7, 1985.

<sup>42</sup>The *Boston Globe*, November 13, 1985.

<sup>43</sup>The *New York Times*, December 9, 1985.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., June 5, 1985.

<sup>45</sup>The *Washington Post*, July 18, 1985.

3. On July 26, 1985, Secretary of State George Shultz did not limit his response to the obvious denial of a Mexican request for bilateral U.S.-Nicaraguan talks, adding that the United States would be "more amenable" if the Sandinistas began "national reconciliation" talks with the Contras.
4. On September 8, 1985, a working paper by Assistant Secretary of State Elliot Abrams indicated that "collapse would be better than a bad agreement."<sup>46</sup>

In addition to official U.S. statements, there were also continuous statements by private groups supporting the Contras.

Again, had not the U.S. public stance given at least logical plausibility to the Nicaraguans? The stage was set by Nicaraguan Ambassador Astorga, who told the press in Cartagena, Colombia, that given the United States's "irreversible decision" to support the Contras, Nicaragua believed that "Contadora by itself is insufficient without the signing of an additional agreement."<sup>47</sup>

In the context of the official U.S. statements, and following the Nicaraguan refusal to accept the September Plan, the statement of Deputy Foreign Minister Tinoco had to appear at least logical, given the circumstances: "To sign the document without a commitment of non-aggression by Washington would be suicidal for Nicaragua, and we were not born to commit suicide."<sup>48</sup>

The Nicaraguan refusal to agree to Contadora had not been brought about by any changes in U.S. actions or any successes by the Contras; it was a response to changes in the document itself, which in turn reflected significant changes in the international context of the negotiations, including the following:

1. The new surge of democracy in Latin America, which not only converted the members of the "Lima Group" (Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Peru) into living advocates of pluralist politics, but also tarnished the credentials of "semidemocratic" Mexico to speak for Latin America.
2. The changing mood in Europe, especially in democratic Spain and France, as the Leninist nature of the Sandinista project became more evident.
3. The development of pluralist politics, which were in full swing in the rest of Central America by mid-1985.

<sup>46</sup>The *New York Times*, September 9, 1985.

<sup>47</sup>FBIS-LA, December 5, 1985.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., November 22, 1985.

Among the members of Contadora (Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, and Mexico), both Venezuela and Colombia had ample reasons to want changes in the document—Venezuela because of its traditional, though since 1984 more reserved, support of democracy,<sup>49</sup> and Colombia because of suspicions that the Sandinistas were lending support to the M-19 insurgency as well as a territorial conflict over the Quito Sueño islands in the Caribbean.

While Nicaragua objected to some of the military aspects of the September document (e.g., foreign military maneuvers were in 1985 merely "regulated" rather than, as previously, banned outright), the real objections were to the long and detailed sections in Chapters II and IV on Commitments with Regard to Political Matters (especially Section 3, Commitments with Regard to Human Rights) and Commitments with Regard to Economic and Social Affairs (especially Section 2, Commitments with Regards to Refugees). Nicaragua also objected, of course, to the fact that the September document had detailed provisions for the machinery and method of verification and implementation.

That the mood and trends in Latin America were not favorable to Leninist projects was made patently clear during the months of late 1985 and early 1986, as the electoral results from Honduras, Guatemala, and Costa Rica became evident. Far from contributing to the continued official U.S. position asserting the "domino theory,"<sup>50</sup> the results of those elections should have been matters of quiet congratulations and confidence that Sandinista and other Marxist-Leninist propaganda efforts in Central America had failed miserably. In Guatemala, Christian Democrat Venicio Cerezo won by the greatest landslide in that country's history, with 68 percent of the vote; in Costa Rica, Oscar Arias received 52 percent of the vote, while his Social Christian opponents received 45.8 percent. Crucial was the fact that the Communist Party (under the banner of the Popular Alliance), which had undertaken a purge to put stoutly pro-Moscow and pro-Sandinista members on its Central Committee, received only 0.7 percent of the popular vote.

<sup>49</sup>Two excellent pieces have been published on this subject by Venezuelans: Anibal Romero, "La situación estratégica de Venezuela," *Política Internacional*, No. 1, enero-marzo, 1986; and Carlos A. Romero, "Las relaciones entre Venezuela y Estados Unidos: ¿Realidad histórica u opción política?" *Política Internacional*, No. 2, abril-junio, 1986.

<sup>50</sup>The *New York Times*, January 18, 1986. On the CBS Morning News, March 4, 1986, White House Director of Communications Pat Buchanan stated that "the Communists, Ortega and Castro, will roll up Nicaragua, and then we will be left with two options. Basically, the U.S. can then step aside and watch the Warsaw Pact roll up Central America, or we send in the Marines." The purpose of such an "either-or" statement was to allow the existing Contra military option to appear acceptable, given the alternatives.

Despite all these changes in the international environment, in the Contadora document, and in Nicaragua's position toward it, the U.S. position continued to be summed up by Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Elliot Abrams. To note, as he did, that support of the Contras did not undercut Contadora might be debatable; what was not debatable was his extension of that point: "The only way to get the Sandinistas to agree to Contadora is pressure."<sup>51</sup> That was clearly not proven, and it only illustrated just how wedded to original policy the Administration was. The opportunity of September 1984 through September 1985 (and consequently beyond) was lost.

### CONCLUSION

In December 1981, President Reagan signed the first National Intelligence Finding establishing U.S. support for the Nicaraguan Resistance; Congress responded in December 1982 with the Boland Amendment prohibiting Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Department of Defense (DoD) expenditures to promote overthrowing the government of Nicaragua. When in October 1984 Congress voted to cut off all funding for the Contras, the National Security Council staff, and especially Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North, moved to fill the void left by the CIA and the DoD. The complex legal, constitutional, and political consequences of all this activity are still being played in a classic battle between the Executive Branch and the Congress.

In all fairness to the complexities of U.S. foreign policy formulation, it should be made clear that there appears to have been a constant battle within the Administration itself concerning the role of diplomacy generally and Contadora specifically. In March 1987, the press mentioned tension between the newly appointed National Security Advisor, Frank Carlucci, and Presidential Special Envoy Philip Habib.<sup>52</sup> This appeared to be a new phase of an older battle.

In May 1986, Leslie Gelb of the *New York Times* reported that Habib and the State Department felt that the September 1985 Contadora document was "workable," and they objected to the release to Congress of the Pentagon study.<sup>53</sup> Gelb reported that Elliot Abrams was siding with the Pentagon. Two days later, Linda Greenhouse reported that Representative Jack Kemp (R-New York) had called on President Reagan to fire Habib for saying that the United States would

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>The *New York Times*, March 30, 1987, p. 10.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., May 20, 1986.

discontinue support for the Contras if a workable Contadora treaty could be secured.<sup>54</sup>

While Habib has not been dismissed, there is a question as to whether his mid-1986 point of view has endured—in the Administration and perhaps even in his own thinking.<sup>55</sup> On February 12, 1987, Secretary of State Shultz made a “strong appeal” for continued aid to the Contras, saying that the only alternative was direct U.S. intervention.

Why, in the face of the Sandinistas’ ability to switch the whole focus of world attention from the internal civil war—which led to the establishment of Contadora in the first place—to the United States as an aggressor, has there been so little effort to exploit the new international and Latin American context? Why is there not even a recognition that the revised version of Contadora, the September document, and especially the Arias Plan are indeed not merely workable but an opportunity to gain a much needed diplomatic initiative? Would not such an initiative be advisable, given the existence of a short- to medium-term military stalemate and the fact that over the long haul the Sandinistas appear to have an advantage? Even if it were calculated that Congress would continue to fund the Contras and that discontent in the countryside would guarantee continued recruits, giving the Contras the long-term military advantage, does it not make sense to join the negotiations now?

It was widely believed that the change of the civilian command of the Contras to include at least three members who have favored talking to the Sandinistas in the past signaled a change in U.S. policy. Certainly the prominent role played by President Oscar Arias in that process would indicate that this might have been his thinking.<sup>56</sup> Is Arias a naive international player? Hardly. He had not been in office long before he was expressing exasperation: Discussing the Esquipulas meeting in Guatemala, Arias noted that he had learned that “the Nicaraguans are ready to sign anything but not to comply with what they sign.”<sup>57</sup>

The fact is that President Arias, who governs a country as stoutly anti-communist as the United States and who has more to lose from

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., May 22, 1986.

<sup>55</sup>On February 11, 1987, James Le Moyne reported in the *New York Times* that Europeans were concerned with a recent visit by Habib in which “he strongly suggested the possibility of an American attack on Nicaragua.”

<sup>56</sup>After months of bickering, resignations, and U.S. cajoling, a new organization called the Nicaraguan Resistance was born in early May 1987 in San José, Costa Rica. There will be a single, integrated “Nicaraguan Resistance Army” directed by a 7-member Civilian Directorate which is accountable to a 54-member Consultative Assembly.

<sup>57</sup>*La Prensa Libre*, June 2, 1986.

any ill-conceived peace plan, has proposed a realistic peace formula. The Arias Plan recognizes that Central America represents a geopolitical area, that the "security dilemma" operates powerfully in such areas, and that as a result, negotiations have to be regional as well as state-specific.

With modifications, the plan of President Arias seems to present an opportunity that should be grasped. The Arias Plan is superior to the Contadora plan in that it covers all of Central America and puts real emphasis on—and provides for the machinery to implement—democratization. However, the Arias Plan can be faulted on two counts: (1) its call for an armistice (ceasefire) "simultaneously with the beginning of the dialogue" and (2) its specification that that dialogue should include only "unarmed groups of internal opposition." Such demands follow neither logic nor recent historical practice.

Since the rest of the Arias Plan calls for amnesty, i.e., negotiation on the integration of the armed rebels into the political system, the bargaining strength of the rebels will be the military strength they had at the moment of the ceasefire. Naturally, the rebels (both FDN and the FMLN) will believe that they should improve their military position before the armistice. Bargaining strength in wars such as this is very much a matter of perceptions on both sides, so this situation can go on for unconscionably long periods, which indeed is occurring today. It is precisely to avoid this bloody "catch-22" that belligerents in recent conflicts have not been making negotiations conditional on ceasefires. The French-Algerian FLN negotiations in the early 1960s went on for nearly two years before a ceasefire was called; in the case of Vietnam, it was fully four and one-half years. There was then, as there is today, the realization that in the face of an increasingly bloody stalemate that is likely to end in negotiations "someday," it is best to begin negotiations now. This is so partly because of one well-studied advantage of pre-armistice negotiations: They tend to make it easier for either party to call for a ceasefire without losing face.<sup>58</sup> The long-standing Sandinista campaign to show itself ready to negotiate should be taken up by the United States. The United States would not then be making the first move but would merely be agreeing to join an existing forum.

Pre-armistice negotiation will naturally mean that the armed combatants will have to be included in the dialogue. Implementing the Arias Plan is going to require that the Sandinistas do what Duarte has already shown himself ready to do in El Salvador with the FMLN—

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<sup>58</sup>Paul R. Pillar, *Negotiating Peace: War Termination as a Bargaining Process*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1983.

recognize the FDN Contras as belligerents.<sup>59</sup> The Sandinistas have consistently refused to do so; it will be up to the Cubans and the Soviets to help them change their minds. Again, the critical role of outsiders is evident. This is the way it is in civil wars. Short of the outright destruction of the enemy, the pressure from outside forces is needed to start negotiations. Neither the FMLN nor the FDN is about to disappear; both the United States and Cuba should publicly declare that they support the beginning of negotiations on a modified Arias Plan.

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<sup>59</sup>By mid-1987, the Sandinistas did not appear to have changed their stance: They were willing to go to Guatemala to discuss peace proposals, "including the Nicaraguan proposals and a recent proposal made by Oscar Arias Sánchez" (Op-Ed column by Carlos Tunnerman, Nicaragua's Ambassador to the United States, the *New York Times*, March 19, 1987, p. 23). On the other hand, three of the seven members of the newly created Directorate of the Nicaraguan Resistance expressed interest in discussing a "modified" Arias Plan (*New York Times*, May 4, 1987, pp. 1, 4).

## **DISCUSSION SESSION: RAPPORTEUR'S REPORT**

Jeffrey D. Simon

The future of the Nicaraguan Resistance movement—the Contras—brings to mind Winston Churchill's depiction of the Soviet Union: "It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma." The afternoon discussion was focused on attempts to find solutions to this contemporary enigma facing U.S. foreign policy. There was a great deal of diversity in the views of the participants, reflecting the divisions within the U.S. government and the public at large concerning the Contras. The goal of the session was not to make recommendations on policy, but rather to clarify the issues.

### **WHO ARE THE CONTRAS?**

The afternoon session began with a brief discussion of the composition and characteristics of the Contras. It was noted that not only is the American public unsure of exactly who the Contras are or what they represent, but the same is true for many people in Nicaragua. The Contras remain a puzzle for the lower classes, and many Nicaraguans are not familiar with their objectives or strategies. And among the upper strata of society, there is a general distrust of the Resistance movement, even among those who are opposed to the Sandinistas. The combination of these factors—lack of knowledge and distrust—has deprived the Contras of important sources of internal support.

The Contras, nevertheless, are depicted as a reflection of Nicaraguan society. Their ranks include former Sandinistas and members of the aristocracy, peasants, and businessmen. But this diversity was also cited as a weakness, since it has prevented the movement from achieving a sense of unity. According to one participant, the Contras will have to move beyond individual personalities and individual leaders if they want to make progress in the war against the Sandinistas. It was also asserted that there is a potentially large peasant base of support for the Contras that has not yet been mobilized.

The United States was blamed by one participant for inhibiting the growth of the Contras as a legitimate indigenous movement. Since the

Contras were essentially the creation of the United States, and because Washington exerted a great deal of control over the formation and direction of the Resistance movement in the early 1980s, the Contras were not able to develop their own ideology or a program that could appeal to the masses in the rural areas. According to this participant, the tendency in Washington has been to favor "managers" and "businessmen" to run peasant revolutions, and this leads to many problems.

One conference participant vehemently denied this statement, however, arguing that one cannot make such generalizations about the United States supporting only businessmen to lead revolutions. It was pointed out that Jonas Savimbi, head of the anti-Marxist UNITA rebels in Angola, who does not fit the mold of either "manager" or "businessman," is among those who are benefiting from American support.<sup>1</sup>

The question was raised as to whether the Sandinistas suffered from an absence of ideology or stated goals and objectives when they were struggling against the regime of President Somoza in the late 1970s. One participant responded that while the Sandinistas did not have an elaborate program, they did issue a small document and made several statements on various issues. The Sandinista program also was flexible, appealing both to the United States and to the anti-Somoza segment of Nicaraguan society. It was also pointed out that unlike the Contras, the Sandinistas structured their program to appeal to Central America as a whole.

### FUTURE GROWTH OF THE CONTRAS

An important aspect of any guerrilla insurgency is recruitment. The Contras have increased from a band of a few thousand guerrillas in the early 1980s to a force of approximately 15,000 in 1987. The question therefore is, Where did this growth come from, and what can be expected in terms of future growth?

Contra recruitment has targeted peasants and rural families, former members of the National Guard, and ex-Sandinistas. A large pool of refugees in Honduras and elsewhere has also been an important source of Contra recruits. One of the reasons the Contras have been more successful in recruiting in rural than in urban areas has been the differences between the revolutionary experiences in the countryside and those in the cities. The Sandinistas won support in the urban areas partly due to the atrocities of Somoza's National Guard. The

<sup>1</sup>One could also point to U.S. assistance to the Mujahideen rebel leaders in Afghanistan as another example of non-businessmen whom the U.S. supports.

peasants, however, remained basically aloof from the revolution. After the Sandinistas took power, some of their policies, including price controls on agricultural products, alienated the rural populations and generated support for the Contras. To erode support for the Contras in the countryside, the Sandinistas have recently implemented land reforms to benefit the peasants. They have also begun to arm some peasant areas to create a first line of defense against the Contras. Yet, as one participant stated, the Contras will eventually have to move beyond whatever peasant base of support their movement may have and begin to penetrate the urban areas, where the majority of the population lives.

Penetrating the cities was cited as an important prerequisite for future expansion of the Contras. It was pointed out that there is a large pool of discontented Nicaraguans in the urban areas that the Contras should be appealing to. Doubts were cast, however, as to the Contras' ability to recruit or fight in the cities. They do not have a strategy for attacking the urban areas, and they do not appear to know what they would do if they were able to break into the cities. As one participant succinctly stated, the Contras do not have a social map of Nicaragua, and until they develop one they will not make significant progress in the guerrilla war.

### STRATEGIES AND OBJECTIVES OF THE CONTRAS

There was agreement among the participants that the Sandinistas are clearly consolidating their power and strengthening their political and military base at a much faster rate than the Contras. Thus, one objective of the Contras should be to prevent further consolidation of Sandinista power. How this might be accomplished, though, and how "progress" can be measured in an insurgency led to a lively exchange of views.

It was first suggested that the future growth of the Contras is not as important as what they will be able to achieve by any increase in their ranks. Their most immediate objective, according to one participant, should be to bring about a stalemate in the war and thereby create areas throughout the country where the Sandinistas cannot govern. Another participant disagreed, claiming that a stalemate would only favor the current regime in Managua, since they could live with a long-term insurgency. The Contras would only be a nuisance to the Sandinistas, not a serious threat. However, it was pointed out that even if the Sandinistas could wait out the Contras, a stalemate would nevertheless change the psychology of the Resistance movement and help build morale.

One conclusion about the Contras emerged from the discussion session: They do not have any clear notion of what their ultimate objectives should be in the war against the Sandinistas. Some Contra commanders have a goal of nothing less than unconditional surrender, while others do not have such lofty aims. For some, a political settlement would be an acceptable outcome. The divisions in the Contra movement were described as a reflection of U.S. policy, which has been ambiguous in terms of what should be expected from the Resistance movement. Different segments of the U.S. government are portrayed as having different responsibilities, perceptions, and inputs to American policy toward Nicaragua. The lack of a consistent, coordinated policy in Washington was cited as a major reason for the lack of clear objectives among the Contras themselves.

The need for the Contras to capture territory inside Nicaragua was also a topic of discussion. One participant stressed the importance of the Atlantic coast for future Contra strategic objectives. Another pointed out that even if the Sandinistas were to control 80 percent of the country, the capture of the Atlantic coast would be a major victory for the Resistance movement. It would help to cut off Cuban access to Nicaragua and would be a major psychological boost for the Resistance.

However, to capture the Atlantic coast, the Contras would have to "win" the area quickly. And they have not yet shown a capacity for quick victories—nor have they attempted to capture the coastal area. According to the same participant, it is now too late for the Contras to move into this area. Another participant agreed, stating that the Contras could gain control over the Atlantic coast only with the assistance of the U.S. Marines.<sup>2</sup>

One participant said that because the Contras are dependent on U.S. aid, they must be concerned with the fluctuations in U.S. politics. It was argued that in order to obtain continued U.S. assistance, the Contras will have to demonstrate a capability to achieve significant battlefield progress, while at the same time avoiding large numbers of civilian casualties. Furthermore, U.S. support may be contingent upon the Contras broadening their political base. A participant pointed out that the Contra organization is sorely lacking in political cadres who could help explain to the Nicaraguan people why the Contras are fighting. However, it was noted that it is not easy to convince the Contras that they need to change their strategy and start appealing to the people.

<sup>2</sup>During an earlier seminar at RAND, one of the participants observed that the Nicaraguan defense posture was designed to defend the Atlantic coast with reserves and militia, the central part of the country with the light infantry battalions (BLIs), and the Pacific coast (particularly Managua) with the regular army. The strategy was to contain the Contras on the Atlantic coast.

Furthermore, the political organization that does exist is primarily composed of exiles in Miami, and there is some resentment among the Contras who are fighting in the field toward the political figures who are removed from the daily operation of the war.

A question often asked about the strategies and objectives of the Contras is whether there is any expectation that they can topple the Sandinistas. If victory is indeed a goal for the Contras, what is their timetable? And if they don't have such a goal, or if it is unlikely that they will ever be in a position to defeat the Sandinistas, should the United States continue to provide them with military and economic assistance?

These questions produced an impassioned response from one participant, who stated that it would be unfair to place a special requirement upon the Contras to "win" when the United States does not place such criteria on other insurgent groups that it supports. For example, Washington supports the anti-Marxist UNITA guerrillas in Angola, yet it does not expect UNITA to topple the Angolan government. Nor does it expect "victories" by the Mujahideen rebels in Afghanistan or the Eritrean rebels in Ethiopia. Therefore, questions concerning the Contras' ability to "win" should not dominate discussions about U.S. policy toward them. Since the Contra effort is likely to be protracted, it is inappropriate to keep asking questions concerning victory or defeat. Rather, the concern should be with keeping the Contra movement alive during hard times.

At the same time, this participant emphasized that it is up to the Contras themselves to fight the war. The focus in recent years has been on what U.S. objectives should be regarding the insurgency and the overall situation in Nicaragua. This has made the anti-Sandinista revolution appear to be a U.S. revolution. Thus far, the Contras and those opposed to the Sandinistas have been hampered by what the United States wants in the war. The total dependence of the Contras upon U.S. aid has been a major mistake in the insurgency. The Contra leadership will have to learn, like other insurgents, how to operate during austere times. Their purpose should be to survive. Once the Contras learn self-reliance and create their own leadership, they will be able to move to a higher and more effective level of warfare.

These sentiments were echoed by another participant, who was troubled by the fact that when the United States aids a guerrilla insurgency, it tends to become more concerned about the struggle than the guerrillas themselves. If the Contras do not have a basic will to persevere in the fight against the Sandinistas, what can the United States really do? While Washington may have made mistakes in the early stages of the Resistance movement by not allowing the Contras to

develop their own base of support and their own strategies and ideology, the Contras themselves have to share the blame for their current state of affairs. And it may also be time for the United States to turn the Contras loose, if indeed it has been an inhibiting factor in their growth and development. It was also pointed out that the speed with which the guerrillas quit in southern Nicaragua as soon as U.S. aid to Eden Pastora's forces was cut was distressing. One panelist disagreed, pointing out that it was the political leadership that had abandoned the campaign after aid was eliminated, not the guerrillas.

However, several participants noted that the Contras would not be able to survive a complete cutoff of U.S. aid. One participant stated that the elimination of U.S. assistance would mean the "end of the game" for the Contras. Another said that if U.S. assistance were eliminated, the Contras would begin to split up and the Sandinistas would be able to "knock them off one by one." It was also noted that U.S. abandonment of the Contras would tarnish the U.S. image not only among anti-Sandinista Nicaraguans, but among many people throughout Central America. The commitment of the United States to the region would be questioned if Washington abandoned the Contras after placing so much emphasis on their struggle and the larger issue of regional security. Contra funding, therefore, was seen as having implications for broader issues in the region.

Many Americans are concerned about the possibility of U.S. involvement with the Contras eventually leading to the introduction of U.S. troops in active combat in Nicaragua. One panelist explained that the Contra political leaders in Miami expect this to occur. According to this view, they believe that Washington is now stuck with a 15,000-man guerrilla army and will never abandon it. They believe that if the Contras come to the verge of being defeated, Washington will have no choice but to send in American troops. This, in turn, is seen as leading to the eventual collapse of the Sandinistas and the accession to power of the exiled Contra leadership.

One participant expressed dismay at the fact that the Contras appear to be more involved in political maneuvering and attempts to gain political support in Washington than in fighting an effective war. The Sandinistas, on the other hand, appear to be able to concentrate their efforts on military tactics and strategy. Therefore, what specific military operations should the Contras focus on to change this situation and create the image of an effective guerrilla army?

One panelist responded that the Contras should first attack the General Directorate of Security (DGSE) forces—the Nicaraguan secret police—who are an integral part of the Sandinista internal control apparatus. Second, the Contras need to begin hitting bases close to

military headquarters. Dramatic incidents, such as the shooting down of government helicopters or nighttime raids on the homes of key military officials, would be a major shot in the arm for the Contras. In addition, Contra tactics should include attacks in urban areas. There should also be a campaign of continual sabotage of key strategic assets, including oil pipelines. These actions were seen as helping to build legitimacy and support for the Contras.

A key indicator of potential Contra success will be whether the Contras can make effective use of the assistance they are receiving from the United States. Specifically, a multiforce, multifront offensive by the Contras would demonstrate that U.S. assistance is being put to good use. It would also tax the ability of the Sandinistas to control the insurgency. One panelist stated that the Contras' strategy should include mortar attacks at night to demoralize the Sandinista army. However, it was pointed out that the Sandinistas could probably tolerate a defection rate of 15 to 20 percent. Furthermore, a whole new generation is growing up under Sandinista rule, creating a large pool of future recruits for the current regime.

#### IMPLICATIONS OF A PROTRACTED WAR

A key issue for the United States is the costs—political and economic—of a protracted war in Nicaragua. As one participant observed, it could become difficult for the Congress and the American public to continue to endure the political and emotional debate that surrounds the question of U.S. support for the Contras. Another participant wondered whether this country will have to continue to pour money into the Resistance movement to avoid being blamed for “losing” Nicaragua.

One panelist responded by asserting that the issue of U.S. aid should be thought of in terms of “cheap” versus “expensive” containment. It would be much cheaper for the United States to continue to aid the Contras than to face the consequences of a Sandinista victory. Expensive containment would mean that the United States would have to upgrade its military and technical assistance to other Central American countries to meet the threat of permanent Soviet bases in Nicaragua and the prospects of Nicaraguan/Cuban support for revolution and political turmoil throughout the region.

Thus, support for the Contras can be viewed as a “low-cost option” for the United States. One participant commented that this appeared to be the most persuasive argument for continuing U.S. aid to the Contras. Other participants, however, disagreed. One argued that contin-

ued U.S. assistance to the Contras over several years would carry political costs at home. Another noted that it would not be that expensive for the United States to provide assistance to other Central American countries to protect them against the threat of an expansive or trouble-making Managua. This participant cited a recent request from Guatemala for \$6 million in aid. Another pointed out that no matter what the outcome is in Nicaragua, the United States will always have economic obligations to other countries in the region and will always feel compelled to help them. Therefore, the notion of "cheap" versus "expensive" containment, or "low-cost options," is not an accurate reflection of the realities of U.S. relations with Latin America.

However, another participant cautioned that we should not assume that U.S. assistance to the Contras will have no effect upon the cohesion of the Sandinistas. Support for the Resistance fighters over the next several years could very well make it difficult for President Ortega and the other Sandinista commanders to further consolidate their power. One of the objectives of protracted warfare is to cause the other side to make mistakes; thus a protracted war might well lead the Sandinistas to clamp down harder on Nicaraguan society. Increasingly repressive policies could lead to a weakening of Sandinista support and new recruits for the Contras.

The war was also described as having a serious impact upon the Nicaraguan economy. The Nicaraguans are generally worse off than other people in the region. Since Managua spends approximately 50 percent of its budget on defense, consumer goods and other nonmilitary items have been neglected. Yet this has not led to any ground swell of opposition or discontent. The government has used social control and public relations to its advantage. In one sense, the war has been used by the Sandinistas for political capital, since they can blame the harsh economic conditions on the war, when in fact those conditions could as well be the result of failed policies, mismanagement of the economy, corruption, or global economic conditions. As one participant observed, the Contra threat means the Sandinistas do not have to address other significant economic, political, and social problems for which they may not have any answers. How long the Sandinistas can continue this practice remains a question.

## PROSPECTS FOR A POLITICAL SETTLEMENT

The audience and panelists briefly discussed the prospects for a negotiated settlement of the war in Nicaragua.<sup>3</sup> One panelist, ex-

<sup>3</sup>This discussion took place before the signing of a Central American peace plan (the latest version of the Arias Plan) on August 7, 1987, in Guatemala City.

pandering upon comments made in the morning session, stated that the United States should pursue an agreement now, since it could come up empty by continuing to support the Contras in a losing effort.<sup>4</sup> It was argued that it would be better to obtain "half a loaf" in any type of agreement than to achieve nothing at all by continuing to support the Contras, who may already have lost the war. Another participant agreed, stating that the Arias Plan is a Central American plan and therefore would be in the interests of both the Contras and the United States to support. Among other things, the Arias Plan calls for a ceasefire and amnesty in all Central American civil wars, a ban on external assistance to guerrilla movements in the region, free elections throughout Central America, and negotiations between governments and the internal political opposition.

However, the notion that any settlement now would be better than pursuing current U.S. policy with respect to the Contras was disputed by one member of the audience. Using the half-a-loaf analogy, this participant stated that we might very well wind up with not half a loaf, but only a crumb if we abandon the Contras in order to achieve any type of settlement. The more the Sandinistas are preoccupied with the Contra war, the less opportunity they have to support or create other insurgencies in the region. Furthermore, the United States would have no bargaining chip with the Sandinistas if the 15,000 Contra guerrillas were in exile in the United States.

Another participant observed that the Contras should place as many of its guerrillas as possible inside Nicaragua in order to ensure that they are part of a potential settlement. It was also suggested that a negotiated settlement should not be boycotted by the Contras, since once there is a ceasefire, an important degree of legitimacy has been achieved in the eyes of both the government and the public.

## CONCLUSION

The RAND discussion session did not reach any consensus on what U.S. policy should be toward Nicaragua. Indeed, given the complexities of the current situation, no comprehensive treatment of the issue could be expected in a single discussion session. Nevertheless, the lively exchange of views on the Contras and U.S. policy implications did result in some valuable observations:

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<sup>4</sup>This participant had also argued that there is no such thing as "limited" U.S. involvement in Nicaragua. In his view, "once you are in an inch, you are in all the way."

### General Points of Consensus

- The Sandinistas are consolidating their power and base of support at a much faster rate than the Contras.
- The Contras are weakened in their struggle against the Sandinistas by internal divisions, including conflicts between the guerrillas in the field and the political leadership in exile.
- The Contras do not appear to have clear objectives or a clear strategy for waging a war against the Sandinistas, nor do they have a social map of Nicaragua to guide future growth and recruitment for their movement.
- The Contras do not have a realistic hope of completely "winning" the war and toppling the Sandinistas on their own.

### General Points of Divergence

- Whether the Contras could survive a total cutoff of U.S. aid.
- Whether the United States should be concerned with the issue of the Contras winning the war, or should concentrate on trying to keep the Contra movement alive during hard times.
- Whether it is unfair to require the Contras to demonstrate a capability to defeat the Sandinistas as a condition for further U.S. aid, when other insurgent groups the United States supports do not have to meet such criteria.
- Whether the Contras can eventually cause serious problems for the Sandinistas through a campaign of protracted war that results in economic and political problems for the Sandinistas and leads Managua to adopt more repressive measures.
- Whether U.S. support for the Contras is the best "low-cost option" for this country, or whether the political and economic costs will rise as the conflict continues.
- Whether the United States is to blame for inhibiting the growth of a legitimate indigenous Nicaraguan resistance movement by exerting too much control over the Contras in the early years, and whether Washington will be held accountable for losing the war if it now abandons the Contras.
- Whether the Sandinistas can be trusted to adhere to a negotiated settlement.

These and other questions will continue to fuel the debate over U.S. support for the Contras as developments unfold in Central America. The RAND roundtable discussion was an attempt to provide a forum for the exchange of views on this important foreign policy issue.

## **Appendix**

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

#### **1. What are the Contras?**

- Are they a truly indigenous guerrilla force with political support inside Nicaragua?
- Are they capable of becoming such?
- Are they a mercenary army maintained by U.S. support?
- Are they becoming more Nicaraguan, less U.S.?
- Are they becoming less under U.S. control?

#### **2. What is the objective of the Contra campaign?**

- Prevent consolidation of the Sandinista government?
- Overthrow the government?
- Impose a cost for Nicaraguan support for guerrillas in El Salvador?
- Inhibit the export of revolution?
- Gain and hold territory?
- Harass the economy—make Nicaragua poorer?
- Do U.S. and Contra perceptions of objectives differ?

#### **3. What, realistically, might the Contras optimally accomplish?**

- How likely?
- What is the sequence of events by which this will come about?
- How long do people think it will take (2 years, 2 to 5 years, 5 to 10 years, more than 10 years)?
- What levels of support will be required over what period of time?

#### **4. What effect is the Contra campaign having on Nicaragua?**

- Has it caused serious military problems?
- Has it caused serious economic problems?
- Has it facilitated consolidation?
- Has it attained international sympathy and support?
- Has it justified repression?

**5. How will Nicaragua respond to the Contra threat?**

- Will it increase subversion into surrounding Central American countries?
- Will it allow more Cuban and Soviet access?
- Will it make them more likely to negotiate?
- What kinds of political and international problems will they try to create for the U.S.?

**6. How do we measure Contra military effectiveness?**

- By the size of the organization?
- By the forces they keep in the field?
- By number of attacks?
- By value of targets destroyed?
- By defections from the Sandinista forces?
- By refugee flows out of Nicaragua?

**7. Are the Contras a success or a failure today and how will we know if the Contras are succeeding or failing (most difficult to assess will be partial success/partial failure)?****8. Does the situation require targeting that imposes suffering on the civilian population?**

- Is this a necessary and permanent ingredient of the struggle?
- Should the United States attempt to alter Contra tactics?

**9. If the Contras succeed, what next?**

- Do we intervene militarily to support a weak Contra regime faced with residual Sandinista resistance?
- What if the Contras seize territory and then are faced with an all-out Sandinista offensive?

**10. If the Contras fail, how does the U.S. extricate itself?**

- Do we cut off the money?
- Do we remove the Contras?
- What other policy instruments or options do we have?

- 11. What are the Contras likely to do if U.S. aid is cut off?**
- 12. What are the U.S. alternatives to continued support for the Contra campaign?**